Writing shortly after the First World War, in his examination of the economic demobilization in Bavaria, Kurt Königsberger described the German revolution as 'nothing other than the demobilization of the nerves' ("nichts anderes als die Demobilmachung der Nerven"). While this characterization of the revolutionary upheavals of 1918 and 1919 may have been something of an oversimplification, it has the merit of placing those upheavals into a revealing if often overlooked framework. By relating the revolution to the processes of demobilization in the widest sense, and thus implicitly to the processes of wartime mobilization, it suggests how the events of 1918–19 may have been linked to what had occurred in Germany during the war, and that the revolutionary unrest might be seen as a reaction to wartime political, economic and social mobilization. Viewed from this angle, the German revolution itself might appear a sort of political demobilization, and an expression of the failure of wartime attempts to mobilize the German people.

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the limits of wartime mobilization. It proceeds from the suggestion outlined above that one way to understand the 'German revolution' might be to regard it as a political demobilization which followed the extraordinary and ultimately unsuccessful attempts at mobilization of the war years and which paralleled the military, economic and social demobilization at the end of the conflict. Thus the attempts at economic and political mobilization during the second half of the war may be seen to have led directly to the economic and political collapse which followed. The wartime attempts at mobilization aroused expectations which probably never could have been met, even had Germany won the war, and consequently provoked a massive negative reaction when they came to nothing. The mobilization of 1916 and 1917 and the revolution and demobilization of 1918 and 1919 might therefore be seen as a continuum, whereby the latter was a reaction to the former.

The contrasts between the wartime mobilization and the post-war demobilization in Germany are remarkable. Wartime mobilization was
an expression of enormous bureaucratic effort and frenetic planning, and ultimately proved a spectacular failure. The hasty post-war demobilization, which caught the planners largely unawares and which was guided by a rough *ad hoc* policy of 'wriggling through', proved a surprising success. Where the wartime mobilization failed either to generate solid popular support behind the idea of a 'victorious peace' or to increase weapons and munitions production as had been hoped, the demobilization of Germany after the First World War appeared stunningly successful in the short term. Contrary to many expectations, the soldiers were rapidly brought back to the Reich and were largely integrated into civilian life, and the sudden transition in the economic sphere from the overwhelming concentration on war production was achieved without complete collapse or terribly high unemployment in the immediate aftermath of the war. This juxtaposition of the striking failure of Germany's wartime mobilization with the surprising success of the post-war demobilization presents us with an important question. Was not 'mobilization' in large measure a delusion of Germany's political and military elites who, having lost touch with economic realities and with the population which they allegedly were attempting to mobilize, effectively undermined their own positions? Or, put more generally, is the idea of mobilizing for 'total war' more an expression of the perceptions of political, military and economic elites than a description of what actually happened on the ground?

Of course, observation that the attempt at the extreme mobilization of wartime Germany proved a resounding failure is hardly new. The profoundly disruptive consequences of the political and economic mobilization which took place in Germany during the First World War have been well documented. With the appointment on 28 August 1916 of Paul von Hindenburg as chief of the General Staff and Erich Ludendorff as First Quartermaster-General, the stage was set for an attempt at the 'total mobilization' of the German economy for war. The overwhelming popular support for these appointments by a population which had grown tired of war and hoped for a quick end to privations and sacrifice tended to obscure what had actually happened – that Germany's wartime government had largely abdicated responsibility to radical militarists who were convinced that the way to achieve results was to issue orders.

Under the direction of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, a radical programme was imposed which paid scant attention to the problems faced by a Germany that confronted both a military alliance with superior economic and human resources and military stalemate in the West. Through the Hindenburg Programme, Germany's wartime rulers
demanded an enormous increase in weapons and munitions production, and through the Auxiliary Service Law of 5 December 1916 they aimed to compel Germany’s civilian population to assist the war effort. Absolute priority was to be given to the needs of the military; huge increases in munitions production were ordered without regard to the consequences or to the lack of the necessary resources – both human and economic – required to bring these increases about. As Gerald Feldman noted more than a quarter of a century ago, the ascendance of Hindenburg and Ludendorff ‘represented the triumph, not of imagination, but of fantasy’. German political and economic leaders increasingly took refuge in a fantasy world which allowed them to avoid the narrow constraints within which they had to operate. The flight into fantasy was not limited to the Supreme Army Command but also extended to the boardrooms of industry, where directors could proclaim indignantly (as did a member of the board of the Oberschlesischer Berg- und Hüttenmännischen Verein in June 1917) that they had absolutely nothing to be ashamed of (‘Wir Industrieller haben keinen Fleck auf der Weste’). Difficulties with and unrest among the labour force allegedly had nothing to do with them but were due instead to the Auxiliary Service Law, ‘outside agitators’ and pernicious government interference which had led to the payment of higher wages and restrictions on price rises for coal. The more Germany mobilized for ‘total war’, the more those directing that mobilization became divorced from the economic and political reality around them.

In the event it was not ambitious targets but rather the harsh facts of economic life in wartime Germany – the scarcity of raw materials, the labour shortages, the limits on what could be demanded of employees, and (not least) the greed of German industrialists – which actually determined how many shells rolled off the production lines. In fact, the goals of the Hindenburg Programme had to be brought into line with reality, rather than the other way round. The mobilization of resources envisaged by Germany’s military rulers was in large measure an illusion, a paper exercise. As Michael Geyer has observed of the wartime attempts to increase armaments production and mobilize labour resources to their utmost by means of the Hindenburg Programme and the Auxiliary Service Law: ‘The War Office administered and organized, but had little influence on what occurred in industry.’ However, this does not mean that the attempts at extreme economic mobilization had no effect. If anything, the results were the opposite of those which Germany’s wartime rulers had intended. Instead of achieving an effective economic mobilization, the failure of the Hindenburg Programme and the Auxiliary Service Law served to undermine civilian morale further, to
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prove growing popular discontent, and to fuel a growing desire for an end to the conflict whether or not Germany might emerge victorious. That is to say, not only were the attempts at economic mobilization largely ineffective in achieving their aim, they also proved profoundly counterproductive.

Similar observations may be made about the attempts at political mobilization during the second half of the war. The weakening of morale which resulted from the combination of military stalemate, rising casualties (with no end in sight), worsening living conditions at home, and evidence of obvious mismanagement of the economy by a government attempting to achieve the impossible, provoked renewed concern to bolster patriotic sentiment and popular support for a victorious peace. A victorious peace was to be the means by which to square the circle. Territorial aggrandisement and war booty were to be compensation for the years of privation – the bribe for war enthusiasm and/or grim determination to ‘see it through’. Without such a bribe, Germany’s rulers were fearful of how the German population would regard the sacrifices they had been called upon to make. As Max Weber observed in the middle of the conflict, Germany’s continuation of the war ‘essentially was conditioned not by objective political considerations but by the fear of the peace’. 8 The spoils of victory were to compensate for the privations of war – a contract which implicitly underlay the programme of ‘patriotic instruction’ (‘vaterländischer Unterricht’) for the troops launched during the second half of 1917, and to which Ludendorff and countless government officials devoted considerable attention. It was a contract which could not be met.

The most resonant expression of ‘patriotic’ political mobilization in Germany during the second half of the war was the Fatherland Party (Vaterlandspartei), established in August 1917. Formed at the urging of Germany’s military leadership and in reaction against the ‘Peace Resolution’ passed by the Reichstag in July 1917, enjoying official and industry support and with an extreme annexationist programme, the Vaterlandspartei was intended to rally Germans against a compromise peace and political reform. It was, therefore, from the moment of its birth more an expression of the political divisions in Germany than of some unifying ‘spirit of 1914’ – a point underscored by the contrast between the repressive measures aimed at the Social Democrats and the trade unions on the one hand and the official favour bestowed on the Vaterlandspartei on the other. 9 The new party rapidly attracted an enormous membership – 1.25 million members organized into roughly 2,500 local groups. Impressive though this may have been, however, the most striking characteristic of the support for the Vaterlandspartei, aside
from its size, was its ephemeral nature. Mass support for the party evaporated almost as quickly as it had coalesced. Already by the beginning of 1918, well before it had become obvious that Germany was heading for defeat, the party's activities often were successful more in stirring public disquiet than in whipping up support for rabid nationalism. Meetings of the Vaterlandspartei were broken up and many Germans became convinced that it was 'contributing to the prolongation of the war through its demands for a peace from a position of strength (Machtfrieden'). Thus the attempts of the Vaterlandspartei at political mobilization were undermined by the war-weariness which had become widespread among the German population. What remained in the wake of its failure was an unrealistic conviction among many Germans that their country could and should have achieved an annexationist peace, together with a further fragmentation of the political consensus on the meaning and direction of the war.

It was not only the attempts at wartime mobilization by the right which posed political problems and proved counterproductive. On the left, the Social Democrats were weakened and divided by the challenge of the war; the membership of the Social Democratic Party and the Social Democratic trade unions declined steeply as hundreds of thousands of members were called to the colours, and the party split over its attitude to the war. To some degree, the position of the Social Democrats paralleled that of the government, caught between, on the one hand, patriotic sentiment and the desire to 'see it through' and, on the other, growing popular impatience and discontent as a result of the wartime privations and injustices which people had had to suffer. Unlike their political opponents on the right, however, the social democrats could not offer the bribe of annexation to convince a tired and embittered population that the sacrifices had been, and continued to be, worthwhile. Their hope was that the experience of the war, and the loyal contributions of the one-time 'unpatriotic fellows' to the war effort, would lead to a democratization of Germany's authoritarian political system. The prize to which the Social Democratic leadership aspired was full integration into the political system and participation in government – a prize which appeared of questionable value to people suffering extreme privations and whose overriding desire was simply that the war be brought to an end.

One particularly revealing measure of the failure of German political mobilization during the second half of the war was the fate of attempts to sell war loans to the civilian population. Unlike the United Kingdom, Germany did not have access to international (essentially American) capital markets, nor could Germany easily raise more money by direct
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taxation from a population already suffering severe hardship and serious undernourishment. This left the German government with two main sources of funding for the war effort: printing money and borrowing from the German people through war loans. This, in turn, made the fate of war-loan issues critical. Whereas during the first half of the war the issues of war loans had been oversubscribed, none were fully subscribed during the last two years of the war. Each of the last five war-loan issues, from mid-1916 onwards, was undersubscribed to a greater degree than the previous one, and the Eighth and Ninth War Loans (both in 1918) were undersubscribed by 23.9 and 39.0 per cent respectively. It seems clear that 1916 was the turning-point. Not only was the Fifth War Loan, in September 1916, the first to be undersubscribed, but the numbers of Germans who signed up for it (3.8 million) were far below the numbers who had signed up for the Fourth War Loan the previous March (5.2 million). As the Landrat in Rüdesheim noted in November 1917, the poor response to calls to subscribe to war loans demonstrated that ‘the patriotic feeling of the ordinary people is declining more and more’. Soldiers urged relatives not to subscribe, and during the final stages of the war, soldiers on leave were warning people at home, ‘especially the women’, against signing up for the Ninth (and last) War Loan, because the military situation looked so bad. The extreme attempts by the government to mobilize the German population during the last two years of the war were accompanied by declining popular willingness to finance the conflict.

The war-weariness and sullen discontent which spread among the German population during the second half of the war was a world away from the society apparently addressed in official pronouncements. Germany’s rulers were trapped by their own propaganda – such as the assertion, contained in the introduction to the German army’s guidelines for ‘enlightenment and propaganda activity’ on the home front in May 1917, that ‘the maintenance of a willingness for sacrifice and optimism’ [einer opferfreudigen und zuversichtlichen Stimmung] among the population is the first precondition of success’. Of course, such rhetoric was only to be expected. Propaganda is often most effective among its purveyors, and in any event what else were the political and military elites to say? Such exhortations may have had their desired effect during the first two years of the conflict. However, when set against the evidence of public mood in Germany after nearly three years of war, millions of casualties and the severe food shortages during the ‘turnip winter’ of 1916–17, talk of the ‘maintenance of a willingness for sacrifice and optimism among the population’ appears to have been the replacement of politics with fantasy.
The attempts at extreme political and economic mobilization in Germany during the second half of the war were carried out against a background first of essentially static and, from the spring of 1917, declining troop levels. Troop levels in the field (the Feldheer) had increased fairly steadily from the beginning of the war until the spring of 1916, then rather levelled off until the beginning of 1917, rose again until June of that year (when the Feldheer reached its greatest strength), and declined thereafter—and particularly steeply after the failure of the spring offensives of 1918.18 This was due in part to the high number of casualties, and in part to needs of the wartime economy, as the pressing demand for labour in war industries meant that hundreds of thousands of men declared fit for military service were kept or brought back to work in Germany during the last two years of war.19 That is to say, the more the German government attempted to mobilize society in the service of the war effort, the less successful it was in putting troops into the field to face the Allies—and this at a time when the Allies were benefiting from increasing numbers of fresh troops arriving every month from the United States. The result was declining morale at home and at the front. Within Germany men who had seen wartime military service, whether on leave or called back to essential war work, often were the most effective agents undermining civilian morale. Within the army, the military mobilization and the failed offensives of the spring of 1918 effectively eroded the German army as a fighting force. Morale plummeted and hundreds of thousands of soldiers avoided duty in what Wilhelm Deist has termed a ‘covert military strike’.20 After the numbers of dead and wounded suddenly increased following a period during which military casualties had been quite low (December 1917–February 1918), Germany’s soldiers no longer were quite so willing to be cannon fodder for a lost cause.21 Once again, wartime mobilization achieved the opposite of its aim. Instead of concentrating Germany’s military resources effectively for a knock-out blow, it served essentially to intensify the longing for demobilization—for an end to the conflict and to the sacrifices which mobilization had entailed.

Germany’s wartime mobilization was essentially a male affair, in that it was carried out largely by men and reflected their concerns. However, the wartime German society which was to be mobilized was largely female. With between six and seven million men away in uniform during 1917 and the spring of 1918, adult women in Germany far outnumbered adult men.22 Therefore, while wartime political mobilization remained essentially a male concern, since women continued to be denied representation in the political system, wartime economic mobilization during the second half of the war consisted in large measure of the
mobilization of women – as workers, as producers of food, as purchasers of war bonds. This effort largely failed, since its aims were at odds with the concerns which dominated the everyday lives of most women (and of most men, for that matter) in wartime Germany. Fairly typical of this was the fate of the campaign, begun in February 1917, to induce women in the cities to take up jobs in agriculture which was desperately short of labour. Despite often desperate food shortages in urban areas, German women ignored War Office appeals stressing the benefits for the nation and for their own health of volunteering to leave their homes for work on farms, and farmers proved unenthusiastic about taking on city women. In November 1917 the campaign was broken off, a complete failure.\textsuperscript{23} Far from dutifully following the guidance offered by government bureaucrats, Germany’s women turned to the black market and to the theft of food on a massive scale.\textsuperscript{24} Among women as well as men exhortations to support the war effort – exhortations which had little connection with the actual, day-to-day concerns of most Germans – increasingly fell on deaf ears, and attempts to mobilize German women ultimately proved no more successful than the attempts to mobilize German men.

Mobilization, whether in the economic or military realm, essentially meant sacrifice. Attempts by the imperial German government to mobilize the population were essentially attempts to promote and channel enthusiasm for further sacrifice – sacrifice which appeared increasingly pointless and indeed counterproductive in that, in the absence of a real prospect of victory, it only served to postpone an end to the conflict. Demobilization, on the other hand, appeared to promise an end to sacrifice. Of course this was an unrealistic estimation of what demobilization actually would entail, by a population which had deluded itself into believing that an end to the war and a successful demobilization somehow could bring about a restoration of the \textit{status quo ante}. However, it highlights the link between failed wartime mobilization and the post-war demobilization, in that the unsuccessful attempts to mobilize the German population behind the war effort fuelled desires for an end to the war and for demobilization. In the popular imagination, the aim of demobilization was to reverse what the government had attempted and failed to impose on German society during the war – sacrifice and state control. Demobilization was to be the end of sacrifice and government controls. The failure of mobilization framed the ‘success’ of demobilization.

This helps to explain the enormous antipathy to state controls with which Germans emerged from the First World War and the widespread conviction that demobilization was about reducing state interference in
Wartime mobilization inevitably had meant the extension of state controls – over the distribution of food and raw materials, over prices. Equally inevitably, the extension of controls guaranteed neither adequate supply of food and raw materials nor stable prices. What it did guarantee, however, was intense anger at state interference in people’s everyday lives, and a powerful popular desire that the end of the war and the post-war transition should be accompanied by a jettisoning of the hated controls. Here, too, the wartime mobilization proved counterproductive, in that it undermined the authority of the state and paved the way for revolution and a rapid demobilization.

Alongside sacrifice, the unsuccessful attempts at wartime mobilization had become associated with disorder. War, and wartime mobilization, had been profoundly disruptive of established social and economic relationships, and this gave rise to a widespread desire for the re-establishment of order. Although the conviction that it was possible to reconstruct the pre-war social, economic and moral order reflected Germans’ misunderstanding of their collective predicament in 1918, this nevertheless framed popular expectations of the post-war demobilization. Wartime attempts to control the economy had given rise to a thriving black market. Wartime attempts to give Germans a common sense of purpose had been overwhelmed by divisive pursuit of selfish interest. Women had been compelled to take on roles conventionally regarded as inappropriate, and youth had been deprived of the ‘strong hand of the father’ and allegedly were ‘running wild’. To many Germans, therefore, an end to the war meant the opportunity to put things right again. Wartime mobilization had signified disruption, and for a lost cause. Post-war demobilization was regarded as the process of putting the pieces of a profoundly disrupted society back together.

The above observations raise the question of the extent to which the ‘mobilization’ which occurred in Germany during the second half of the war in fact was a mobilization at all. Indeed, in large measure this ‘mobilization’ consisted of rhetoric aimed at a tired and increasingly alienated and resentful population no longer in a mood to be mobilized to do anything. What actually could a successful ‘mobilization’ have looked like in 1917–18? Was not the idea that the German people or the German economy could be ‘mobilized’ further in 1916–18 quite unrealistic – a political statement, and more an exercise in self-delusion than a realistic assessment of what was possible in Germany during the First World War? It is here that one may see the underlying continuity of 1916–19 – in the crumbling and then the complete disintegration of the illusion that either the German people or the German economy could be
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mobilized effectively. The fact was that by the autumn of 1918 the German people, whether at the military front or on the home front, had had enough. By pressing the point, by attempting to mobilize German society without any realistic idea of what this meant or what was possible, Germany's political elites undermined their own position. The attempt to mobilize German society for 'total war' led not to victory but to economic overstretch, military collapse and political revolution. The failed mobilization during the war led to the 'demobilization of the nerves' of 1918–19.

The experience of Germany (and of the other combatants) during and after the First World War illustrates the limits of attempts at wartime mobilization. The sort of mobilization which political and military leaders believed necessary for the successful conduct of the war was probably impossible to achieve. Attempts to achieve it nonetheless either threatened to undermine the existing political order, as in the case of France during 1917, or actually did so as in the case of Russia in 1917 and in Austria and Germany in 1918. Indeed, such mobilization appears to have been essentially counterproductive – more a reflection of official concerns and the preoccupations of government and military planners than of the realities of fighting or living through a war. Consequently it proved a major irritant which served essentially to widen the distance between rulers and ruled and thus to undermine the very war effort which it ostensibly was intended to bolster.

Germany's failure successfully to mobilize society for war suggests that to attempt to mobilize for 'total war' is to chase a dangerous illusion. Notwithstanding the self-serving theorizing of Erich Ludendorff, the real lesson of Germany's experience of the First World War may be that there is no such thing as 'total war' and that mobilizing for such a thing is self-delusion which serves only to deny the fundamental irrationality of conducting industrial war. 27 No wars are 'total wars'; no nation is totally mobilized for war; no people can have its needs totally subordinated to a war effort. Civilian needs and concerns still need to be met. All wartime mobilization is necessarily partial, and the key to waging war successfully involves establishing a sustainable balance between the needs of the military and the needs of society. That is to say, the key is political.

To judge German wartime mobilization as a failure is, of course, easy to do with hindsight. Obviously, the mobilization failed in the sense that Germany lost the war as both the military and the home front cracked. However, given that Germany's rulers had embarked on a course which was militarily and politically foolhardy, perhaps the mobilization should not be judged solely by its ultimate failure or success but also by the
degree to which it achieved partial goals. Despite the extreme tensions which the First World War created in German society and economy – tensions which ultimately erupted and led to military defeat and destroyed the German empire – Germany did manage to wage war for over four years against a coalition of allies which was superior in both manpower and economic and financial resources. Thus, in a limited sense, the mobilization may indeed have been successful. However, by enabling the German government to prolong a war which they ultimately could not win, that partial success made the inevitable failure that much greater when it arrived.

In an attempt to view the German war economy during the First World War within a comparative perspective, Jay Winter has judged it to have been ‘one of the earliest and least successful examples of a “military-industrial complex” in action’. Following Gerald Feldman’s devastating examination of the failure of German attempts to organize the wartime economy while meeting the interests of the army, labour and (especially) industry, Winter concludes, correctly, that ‘the “corporatist” solution to Germany’s economic difficulties was no solution at all. This was because the waging of war – in economic matters as much as in other spheres – is essentially a political matter.’ This is the crux of the matter. Germany’s attempt to mobilize for and conduct total war – ‘to fly in the face of economics’, as Avner Offer has put it, and effectively to suspend political considerations in a bid to salvage a hopeless military situation – ended in calamity. Neither economics nor politics ultimately could be suppressed. With the revolution and demobilization, political considerations forced their way back on to centre stage. Successful politics involves recognizing economic and social realities and, on the basis of that recognition, making choices about priorities. This is precisely what German wartime leaders, in their attempts to mobilize the German economy and society especially from 1916 onwards, were unable to do. Their attempt to mobilize for total war was a reflection of a denial of politics, and that proved a recipe for disaster.