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**David A. Bell**, *The First Total War. Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin; London: Bloomsbury, 2007. x + 420 pp. \$27.00, £20.00 (hb.) ISBN 978-0-618-34965-4 (US); ISBN 978-0-74757719-5 (UK).

Review Essay by Howard G. Brown, Binghamton University, State University of New York.

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David Bell has achieved the rare feat of writing a book that has great appeal for the *grand public* while also being satisfyingly sophisticated for the professional historian. Rather than parse various definitions of “total war” in the manner of a social scientist, Bell begins with his own basic description and thereafter “embeds [his] arguments in sketches and stories...rather than in analysis alone” (p. 19). The result is a gripping read. It is at once engrossing in its narrative drive and daunting in its analytical ambition. Not only do men, such as Armand-Louis de Gontaut, duc de Lauzun (and later duc de Biron), a dissolute rake and famous army officer, come to life as the epitome of the eighteenth century’s aristocratic culture of warfare, but vivid accounts of various atrocities ranging from the French army’s spree of violence in the village of Châteaumur (Vendée) in early 1794 to the tit-for-tat slaughter in the Spanish village of Arenas in 1809 convey the full horrors of war when it extends beyond mere battlefields. One of Bell’s aims is to ensure that war is not “discussed in a dry, abstract manner, without a sense of the human costs involved—without hearing the screams, seeing the bodies, and smelling the powder and blood” (p. 20). In this he succeeds brilliantly.

Putting individuals and their suffering first is not, in the mind of David Bell, a substitute for probing analysis. Rather, in a manner that should intrigue even the most abstract of academics, Bell explains all the blood and guts as the fruit of a new culture of warfare. This is not simply a question of the rapidly expanding capacity of governments to mobilize men and materiel for war. The new culture of warfare derived from new attitudes to war. On one hand, various strains of eighteenth-century thought, beginning with the Christian humanism of Fénelon and rising to the philosophy of Kant, came to regard war as an appalling aberration rather than an ordinary feature of life that served to advance the glory and honor of monarchs and their aristocratic servitors. Such men believed in the possibility of perpetual peace. On the other hand, an admittedly lesser current of thought (that nonetheless included the likes of Rousseau and von Humboldt) began to glorify war as a means for whole societies to prove themselves.

This may all have remained abstract thinking had it not been for the French Revolution. Faced with the practical problem of deciding just who would have the power to declare war, the king or a future legislature, the National Assembly settled for a compromise. The “patriotic” left obtained the rightly famous declaration of peace at the same time as the monarchist right ensured that the king continued to conduct foreign policy and direct the armed forces. This solution was not a charming absurdity. Rather, as Bell astutely notes, it was a momentous realization of the foreign policy prescribed in Fénelon’s bestseller, *Telemachus*, one in which the revolutionaries rejected both entangling alliances and war waged on behalf of royal glory. Under these new conditions, if France were to find itself at war, it could only be a defensive war waged for the very survival of the nation. In such circumstances, the nature of warfare would necessarily intensify. Furthermore, once the principles of the Revolution were placed in the balance of armed conflict, it would be impossible to avoid apocalyptic thinking. This development would eliminate the few social and moral restraints on warfare that had existed in the eighteenth century. A final rhetorical *surenchère* made the new war a “crusade for universal liberty” (Brissot), or as Bell puts it, “a fight to the finish between heroic free citizens and miserable slaves” (p. 138). Given the right level of delirium, and the right victors, this could even be the war to end all wars.

Thus, the bases for the new culture of warfare—the “first total war”—were fundamentally ideological and rhetorical. The evidence that warfare acquired a new intensity after 1792, at least in France, comes from the expanding size of armies, the growing cult of republican martyrs, a decree from the National Convention allowing no quarter for English soldiers (fortunately honored only in the breach), and, above all, from the ferocious repression inflicted on the Vendée. Here the rhetoric of exterminating the enemy came closest to the reality of military action. “The Vendée was the face of total war,” writes Bell. It was not the size of the armies or the number of deaths, but the “erasure of any line between combatants and noncombatants and the wanton slaughter of both,” that gave warfare in the Vendée its “totality” (p. 184).

In contrast with most historians of the period, Bell does not treat the Vendée as utterly exceptional. In fact, he insists that even after 1794, “War remained total, in the revolutionary manner” (p. 190). This may be his most controversial claim because after 1795, and especially after the invasion scare of 1799, France’s motives for waging war lacked the same apocalyptic elements that characterized the years 1792-94. Bell covers the transition with a fascinating analysis of Napoleon as the embodiment of a new, post-Enlightenment understanding of the “self.” Napoleon’s sense of his “innermost self” as defined by war, which his literary sensibility enabled him to transform into a cult of personality, combined with the growing glorification of war to make warfare a redemptive experience for individuals as well as societies. Apparently, therefore, peace lost its appeal. This explanation is original and intriguing. But beyond being responsible for greatly increasing militarism in France, Bell does not hold Napoleon primarily responsible for the Napoleonic wars. Instead he writes, “the wars had a dynamism and a logic independent of anyone’s intentions” (p. 232).<sup>[1]</sup>

Other historians have tried to explain the link between the Revolutionary and Napoleonic phases of these wars. For example, Arno Mayer has argued that France adopted an expansionist foreign policy after 1795 as a way to channel the violence of the French Revolution outwardly, thus ignoring the extraordinary amount of violence that persisted in France until 1802.<sup>[2]</sup> Certainly, war remained central to politics during the Directory, so much so, that army commanders gained an unhealthy independence in the field. Equally important to the relationship between politics and violence during these years, however, was the role of generals in the interior, where they engaged in repressing brigandage and anti-republican insurgency, as well as frequently having a heavy hand in local elections.<sup>[3]</sup> And yet it remained republican politicians who determined the motives for mobilization. Here Bell’s innovative cultural analysis diverges considerably from explanations based largely on political considerations.

The French First Republic was born in the midst of a military crisis, and only continued military expansion allowed it to survive as long as it did. The ongoing war helped to justify state coercion and exceptional measures while also providing a source of much-needed legitimacy. The republic conquered neighboring territories and turned them into “sister republics” both to protect itself from invasion and to enhance France’s place in the constellation of great powers. Although the Brumaire coup has frequently been treated as a moment of rupture in French history, in fact, the continuities between the late Directory and the early Consulate, that is, over the years 1797 to 1802, are striking. Foremost among these was the importance of waging war as a source of domestic political legitimacy, one which came second only to restoring law and order.

In this context, David Bell’s penetrating insight into the importance of Napoleon’s sense of “self” as a mutable element of his identity can serve as the basis for a somewhat different explanation for the persistence of warfare in the years after the Peace of Amiens (March 1802), an explanation that is grounded more in politics and personality than in rhetoric and ideology. First, it should be noted that Bell does not rely solely on cultural evidence to support his claims. Rather the evidence adduced by Bell for the continuation of “total war” under Napoleon combines the unprecedented scale of warfare in the period with its special intensity in certain areas. Key to this explanation is the reprisal-riddled struggle

to conquer Spain in 1808-13, as well as in the ferocity of peasant insurgencies and their inevitable repression in various occupied territories of the Empire, notably Calabria and the Tyrol. In an operational sense, the more these regional conflicts resembled the Vendée, the more they embodied "total war." Here it is Carl Schmitt's concept of "absolute enmity" that provides the red thread of continuity. Though Bell justifiably and evocatively reminds us of the savagery of these struggles, both the Vendée and Spain are usually seen more as aberrations than as typical of warfare in this period. Had Bell placed greater emphasis on the other campaigns of the period, his book would have been less original; it would also have focused more on Napoleon's personal role in the perpetual warfare.

Bell touches on this key issue when he notes that Napoleon's political survival—at least in 1803—depended on continued success at war. This claim becomes harder to make for the period after 1807, however. A strong case can be made that by the time Napoleon negotiated the Peace of Tilsit with Russia, which consolidated French supremacy in western and central Europe, he had acquired all the legitimacy he needed to preserve his position as Emperor of France.[4] Like anyone who has had a meteoric rise in life, however, Napoleon had acquired more legitimacy in the eyes of most observers than he had acquired in his own. This is not to say that he lacked confidence; he surely did not. But it does explain why, even when the Empire was at its zenith, Napoleon would say, "My power is dependent on my glory, and my glory on my victories. My power would fall if I did not base it on still more glory and still more victories." [5] Furthermore, it was Napoleon's historically precocious grasp of the component parts of his identity, of the mutability of the modern "self," that drove his incessant warmongering. [6]

Restoring the motives of Napoleon to the motives for mobilization casts a refracting light on the "dynamism and logic" of the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. In this light, Bell's concept of "total war" appears as an amalgamation of two contrasting, though complementary, influences on the nature and purposes of warfare as it was fought between 1792 and 1815: responses to the fear of "total defeat" and the means of achieving "total victory." These impulses rarely came together at the same time and same place. The massive mobilization of France for war during 1792-94 was a desperate struggle to preserve the revolution. Those in control of the state at the time had good reason to believe that military defeat would lead to a restoration of the ancien regime. However, after 1795, and apart from the threat of invasion in 1799, neither the French republic nor the Napoleonic empire feared total destruction. Rather, these successive regimes waged war for largely conventional purposes: to obtain an advantageous peace that left France larger and stronger than before. The peace treaties of Campo Formio in 1797, Lunéville in 1801, and Amiens in 1802 were all highly advantageous for France and yet did not involve complete capitulation on the part of France's principal enemies Austria and Britain. Of course, Napoleon found it easy to justify the renewal of war again in 1803 as a defense of France. But by 1805 it had become clear that the nature of warfare was continuing to intensify because Napoleon's aim had become "total victory." This meant an imposed peace, and often regime change, too. The Alexandrian campaigns of 1805, 1806, and 1807 abolished the Holy Roman Empire and redrew most of the borders in central Europe. Although Napoleon would later claim that invading Portugal and Russia, or annexing much of Italy, Holland, and the Hanseatic coast to France, were necessary to enforce the Continental System against England, these acts of aggression were not part of a desperate struggle to preserve either the Revolution or France as a great power. The Continental System was simply an absolute refusal to live on equal terms with either England or any other great power. Its objective was also total victory, that is, the utter subjugation of the European continent to the economic interests of France. The ultimate dynamic that consolidated the new culture of warfare was, therefore, Napoleon's drive to achieve "total victory," one inspired by his persistent dependence on military success to feel secure in his power.

And what of the culture of warfare in the countries arrayed against Napoleon? Despite offering tempting support for his argument, Bell rightly rejects simplistic notions of Spanish or German nationalism as substantial contributing factors in the exponential growth in warfare or the eventual defeat of Napoleon. In fact, apart from Spanish guerillas, themselves now deemed both less ideological

and less significant than long believed,[7] and Prussian romantics such as Theodore Körner, whose influence was really only felt after 1815, Napoleon's major opponents shared a vision of warfare that was more apoplectic than apocalyptic. The leaders of Britain, Austria, Russia, and Prussia all remained benumbed by mutual mistrust and fear of mobilizing the masses. Even the Fifth Coalition did not aim to achieve total victory, at least not until March 1814 when Napoleon's stubborn refusal to engage in serious peace negotiations finally forced them to agree to depose him and base postwar peace on a new vision of collective security.[8]

The success of David Bell's book is assured. It is at once compelling and provocative, accessible and sophisticated, impassioned and nuanced. The success of his argument is less assured. Some critics will look backward and ask why the Thirty Years War should not be described as the "first total war"; others will look forward and claim that it took twentieth-century air power to generate "total war." But David Bell will not be bothered by such critics. His introduction and epilogue indicate that his book is intended more to reinvigorate analysis of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars and to spark discussion of worrisome attitudes to warfare in our time than it is to score debating points among social scientists. Bell has innovated by framing his analysis in cultural terms, and yet his implicit and explicit warnings would not be undercut by including more on the personal and political calculations of warmongers.

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## NOTES

[1] Though not explicitly stated, this interpretation is a rebuke to such scholars as Paul Schroeder who, despite his sophisticated treatment of the international relations of the period, blames all of the wars after 1803 on the unrestrained ambition of Napoleon Bonaparte. See *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[2] *The Furies: Violence and the Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[3] Responses to the problems of law and order during these years helped to create a "security state" in France. See Howard G. Brown, *Ending the French Revolution: Violence, Justice and Repression from the Terror to Napoleon* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006).

[4] Annie Jourdan argues that Napoleon's sense of insecurity in power made it impossible for him to appreciate what was durable and enduring. *L'Empire de Napoléon* (Paris: Flammarion, 2000), p. 75.

[5] Quoted in Geoffrey Ellis, *Napoleon* (London: Longmans, 1997), p. 192.

[6] Steven Englund has also made penetrating observations about Napoleon's vision of his role in history as a novelistic enterprise in *Napoleon: A Political Life* (New York: Scribner, 2004), especially p. 426.

[7] Charles J. Esdaille, *Fighting Napoleon: Guerillas, Bandits and Adventurers in Spain, 1808-1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

[8] Schroeder, *Transformation*, pp. 477-509.

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See also the Review Essays on this book by Jeremy D. Popkin, Annie Jourdan, and Jeremy Black, as well as David A. Bell's response to all four Review Essays.

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