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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 Annie Jourdan, University of Amsterdam.

With this book intended for general readers and for “fellow historians”, David Bell sets himself a real challenge. First of all, to write for two kinds of readership implies different narrative strategies, which, because the expectations of historians are not those of the general public, could appear to be incompatible with each other. One of these strategies is to embed the arguments in a lot of sketches and stories: well-known anecdotes or historical phrases, often tending towards the cliché. This sort of narrative of course is the one historians think the general public appreciates. This may be true, but the danger also arises that it just confirms the reader in his prejudices instead of helping him to get rid of them. Indeed, Bell likes impressionistic anecdotes and certainly has the talent to reproduce them. He deploys bloody and vivid stories that people like to hear, even if they are not always the complete truth or the most important issue. Another concession to the general reader is to be found in the parallels Bell draws between the events of the eighteenth century and those of recent times. Thus, he makes frequent references to recent history—Hitler and the Second World War, Iraq and America and the battle against terrorism, or vice versa the terrorists’ war on America—all would be examples of total war. Historians know how dangerous it is to assimilate recent events and old ones. There is a latent risk of falling into anachronism and teleology—all the more since the material conditions are different, as are the ideologies, the processes, and the contexts. Bell takes this risk, probably in the hope general readers will like the tragic tension it gives to the book.

For “fellow historians”, less is to be learnt. The concept of total war is nothing new. Nor is the argument that the French Revolution anticipated this kind of war. Roger Chickering recently wrote several brilliant essays about the phenomenon; in 2004, Jean-Yves Guimar published a book, which has become a standard reference, on the topic, and several authors have noted that the battles between 1792 and 1815 had many of the characteristics of total war.[1] Although he is a serious and professional historian who has based his research on the work of these authors, David Bell does not seem tempted to discuss their arguments. He adopts some of them but passes over others in silence. Guimar describes total war as the result of imprecise ends and of an involvement of the masses in the military field with only one aim: the complete destruction of the enemy.[2] So does David Bell. But unlike Chickering—and Guimar, who shares his arguments on this issue—Bell’s total war does not need the industrial revolution to appear in its modern form. Nor does he situate the origins of total war in the American Civil War, as Chickering has argued, but in the French Revolution.

For historians who are not familiar with Guimar’s book, the way Bell presents his analyses and approach might seem original. But for those who have already read it, the question arises whether Bell is really bringing something new to Guimar’s arguments. To be fair, his stated aim is to situate the problem of the militarization of France during the revolutionary years within the wider context of the culture of war, on which his study focuses. More than Guimar, Bell has decided to describe this culture. But readers expecting a serious discussion on the topic will be disappointed. The book is actually more about the dynamic and logic of war and about the changing perceptions of warfare and much less about its culture. To know more about the new culture that emerged in revolutionary France and reached its peak in the Napoleonic Empire, one would have to turn to another historian and another very recent book: Jean-Paul Bertaud’s *Quand les enfants parlaient de gloire: L’armée au coeur de la France de Napoléon*. [3] Furthermore, it would be helpful to know if there is not a distinction to be made between

militarism and the culture of war. If militarism is to be interpreted as a contamination by the military of the civil order, then French society from 1792 until 1815 was not fully militarized. Napoleon tried, in fact, to transform France into a military state but did not succeed in achieving this transformation. People were reading and speaking about war, more and more “conscripts” were fighting on the battlefield, and schoolboys attended militarily oriented schools, but French society retained a (private) life of its own. Think of the Civil Code or of the Directory’s salons, where one could discover the expression of a new sensibility—a “domestication of virtue”—which had nothing to do with militarism. No military personnel were at the helm of state, except Napoleon himself, and the laws were not military but civil—even if, as Howard Brown has shown recently, the military penal and criminal courts competed in some periods with the civilian ones.[4]

To be sure, and Bell reminds us of this reality, there was a growing cleavage between the military and civilian spheres (p.217), but if so, it becomes difficult to speak about total war, which Bell previously defined as a confusion between civil and military realms (pp. 8-9 and p.12): civilians and soldiers, all together, being confronted by the war and implicated in its horrors. A war on an “apocalyptic” scale where only military personnel are involved should not therefore be called a total war. For Bell, who goes further than Guimar on this point, war is total when the military imposes its values on the civil society and “harnessed entire societies to a single, military purpose” (p.9). This did not happen because of the already noted gap between the will of the government and the practices of the governed. In fact, it seems that Bell is mixing up militarism with total war.

What does Bell really want to prove with this study about the birth of modern militarism and about what he calls in a somewhat overstated, hyperbolic way, “the cataclysmic intensification of the fighting over the next twenty-three years” (p.9); “an era of *apocalyptic* conflict” (my emphasis; the last adjective is used on pp.2, 4, 5, 7, and 316)? To be sure, he intends not only to study (explicitly) “the place of war in the Western imagination”, but also to focus (implicitly) on the horrors of the revolution, so that his book could be seen as a complement to the gloomy story written some years ago by Simon Schama.[5] Here too the emphasis is on the bloody scenes of a revolution that continued on as the obstacles and dangers were increasing. The declaration of war in April 1792 was the beginning of an escalation of violence, which would end at Waterloo in June 1815. David Bell lets this escalation start at the very beginning. But that is an excuse or a pretext for him to resurrect the Old Regime and the high-minded and genteel nobility. In that time, at least, there were codes of honour and good behaviour.[6] Gentlemen such as the duke of Lauzun are the best examples of these relaxed heroes who went to war in the morning, drank tea in the afternoon, and danced gracefully the night after. Could the author feel a certain nostalgia for those bygone days?

Like Schama, Bell definitely enjoys writing and knows how well he can. This book in reality is destined to be a popular bestseller and not an innovative study based on new archives—even if some are used to highlight the life of common soldiers. Alas, the publisher has chosen a notation style that eliminates the note numbers, perhaps fearing that they would alienate general readers, which makes it harder for scholars to track its sources. However, Bell has used all the information he could find in English, French, and German scholarship published in the last ten years. Horrifying scenes alternate with ironic descriptions of Jacobin demonstrations, including the cult of Barras, the teenage martyr of the Revolution, or the patriotic songs of the sans-culottes. When it moves on to Napoleon Bonaparte, the analysis draws a great deal from the new interpretations of Andy Martin and others about Napoleon as a man of culture and a novelist. And like Luigi Mascilli Migliorini, who is not cited in this book, Bell emphasizes the romantic dimension of the Hero of Italy and finely underlines the way Napoleon incarnated the (new) romantic ego. Napoleon also had the ability to be intimate and familiar with his soldiers, and this too could explain his immense popularity.[7] Far more than Martin, however, Bell interprets the romanticism of Napoleon as a temptation to act not only as a novelist, but as the hero of a novel: this in turn could justify why he did what he did—going far beyond his limits.

But let us return to total war. David Bell discovers the first expressions of such a war in the Convention's discussions in 1793. And it is true; the discussions at the National Assembly could become fierce: speaking of killing all the English, of making a pact with the dead, or exterminating all internal and external foes. But how much here was simply rhetoric or common exaltation and how much was real conviction and actually performed? Laws were passed, but as historians have shown, they were not put into practise by the military authorities. Nor did all representatives-in-mission implement them. Not all was mere rhetoric, I admit. For about one year, a lot of people were indeed convicted on vague grounds and guillotined; this is a fact. Terror was indeed a kind of total war, as were the horrors of the Vendée, but both were limited to a region or to a political category. And if they were limited, it is difficult to speak of total war in the modern sense.

As far as war against the exterior foe is concerned, here again one may doubt whether it can properly be called a total war. The campaign in Belgium and the United Provinces, and those in Italy and in Germany look more like wars of "liberation". They were supported by a part of the population and were not always violent actions. In the sister republics indeed, violence came, above all, from the counterrevolution. This did not mean, as Bell assumes, that these so-called liberated countries all became "puppet states". As a specialist of the Batavian Republic, I would say that until Napoleon and the proclamation of the Empire, the Batavian Republic was relatively independent. Italy was perhaps less autonomous, while Belgium was annexed as early as 1795. But not all sister republics were "puppet states": think also of Switzerland and some of the Italian republics, such as Naples, which followed their own path until Napoleon came to power. In reality, after the fall of Robespierre, the Directory made peace with Prussia and Spain. This truce meant a little rest for Europe. Before 18 Fructidor and still in 1799, many attempts were made to put an end to the other conflicts--peace was made in the Vendée--or to ask for a new kind of diplomacy.[8] Bell does not really speak about these pacifist revolutionaries. For him, pacifism seems to be a privilege of the Old Regime and of the Enlightenment. And yet, the Council of 500 and Carnot--who was, or seemed to be, radical while a member of the Committee of Public Safety but became more realistic under the Directory--wanted to stop the war and limit French territorial ambitions. This policy explains why the Directory tried to make peace with England in 1797. The Fructidor coup ruined all these good intentions, while Napoleon Bonaparte was free to do what he wanted.

As with many contemporary historians such as Sophie Wahnich, Howard Brown, or even Jean-Yves Guimar, who base their interpretations on the theories of Carl Schmitt, the idea of total war brings Bell into contact with the latter's argument about friend and (absolute) enemy.[9] This current "Schmittomania"--if I may call it that--is very problematic because, as we know, Schmitt was a Nazi theorist and wrote in a context different from the revolutionary one, creating concepts then unknown to the revolutionaries, even if the Convention was sometimes paranoid. In the 1930s, Johan Huizinga, one of the greatest historians of modern times, who understood very well what was going on, rejected Schmitt's ideas as inhuman and irrational. Huizinga was preoccupied by his own cultural theory, "homo ludens." [10] For him, culture had always been connected to play. In his eyes, so were wars because they too were competitions with rules of fair play, despite how awful they could be or had been. Sure, the other "side" consisted of enemies or adversaries--*inimicus*--but not of incompatible others--*hostis*--to be destroyed. The very nature of the modernity Huizinga discovered in his own time was the emergence of puerilism and the fading of play. At no time did Huizinga interpret the French Revolution and the First Empire as a prediction or anticipation of what was going to become the Nazi nightmare. And I think he was right! The revolutionary wars cannot be compared to those of the twentieth century, for their material means and ideological ends were very different, as were the levels of involvement and intensity and the hatred emerging out of nationalism and racism. Furthermore, Bell forgets that the Old Regime itself nurtured a tradition of total destruction or extermination of groups who did not share its values. One could cite the massacre of the Albigensians, of the Cathars, or of the Camisards. Since the twelfth century, France had never been a pluralistic country and resistance was severely punished--as the Huguenots would learn to their peril: they had to run away twice, if they did not want to be persecuted.

So, the question arises whether the Revolution's horrors could not be seen in the light of this tradition. Why should the Terror and the culture of war be automatically an anticipation of the hell of totalitarianism instead of the last expression of a tradition of absolutist intolerance?

The main issue here is thus whether the French Revolution and Napoleon implemented a system that made total war a future possibility or whether they initiated a total war at the time, as Bell argues. The former is more probable, although it can be contested. Because civil and military authorities were never really strongly separated or confounded, civil casualties were not as numerous (with the noteworthy exception of the Vendée), diplomacy never completely lost its primacy, and the enemy was in no way as "absolute" as the one Schmitt describes. How can a war be total, however, when it is limited to a region or a village? Spain, it is true, once involved, became a hornet's nest and permitted horrors on a bigger scale, which, once again, were not unknown in the Old Regime; one has only to think of the wars of religion. If I understand the definition correctly, total war cannot be limited to a village, a region, or a group of rebels. It had to include other countries and several armies and dominate civil life.[11] Yet, neither the Revolution nor the Empire exterminated a whole people or succeeded in militarising a whole population. Napoleon followed the rules of war when he took prisoners--as did the revolutionaries (except again in the Vendée). But don't forget that both fought against adversaries who were perhaps more violent than they ever were. Nor did England act any better than France when it came to the Irish "rebels"--as can be seen in the massacre of 1798, with no fewer than 30,000 awful deaths, including women and children.

Human history is neither a story of love and hatred, nor of friend and enemy, but of competition and conflict. It is why Huizinga's theory about the ludic aspects of society is more convincing than Schmitt's, even if the play elements are not always perceptible when a war breaks out. However, Schmitt's theory is determined by a racial and (hyper) nationalistic context and by a hatred of democracy that did not exist in the eighteenth century. The revolutionary wars were perhaps the very beginning of something else--of militarism and perhaps of puerilism, as Huizinga would put it--but still not the absolute end of play and game. Napoleon himself often cheated, but to cheat is not to deny or renounce the game. Cheating is still a game, whereas puerilism consists of breaking the game. For Huizinga, this happened only in the twentieth century, and it was made possible by the industrial or technical revolution and the scientific--or so-called scientific--evolution that together provided the means and the ends.

Let's be realistic instead of "apocalyptic" and accept that humanity has always been tempted to act violently against what stood in its way and to compete with the neighbours, whomever they were. In fact, conflict is a basic form of human interaction. The real changes brought by the Revolution were the never-before-witnessed size of the army, made possible by a huge population. True, the democratisation and professionalization of this army entailed a militarization of a part of the society, but this still did not consist of total war. If France had only had as many inhabitants as England, perhaps the face of the world would not have been altered in the same way. Other real changes were the successes this army achieved, bringing down almost all Old Regime governments on the continent and shaking up the others because of the revolutionary promises of freedom and equality. Meanwhile, the war continued, with some breaks every now and then. So, in 1807, Napoleon was in Tilsit for a grand celebration of the peace with the Tsar of Russia. Once more, the play was on the stage in the literal as well as in the figurative sense, and until the end--Russia or Waterloo--Napoleon was acting time and again as if he were the hero of a novel. This is in a way what one can also conclude from Bell's stress on Napoleon's temperament. But if Napoleon was still playing, it meant that total war was still not on the agenda.

Be that as it may, the moral of Bell's story is that the French Revolution was above all bloody, and it destroyed a far better aristocratic system and initiated the modern total war. Here can be discerned the new conservatism Schama announced in 1989, very far removed from the revisionism of François Furet who truly believed in the new world brought to light by the revolution, which he called, "un monde plus noble que celui qui l'a précédé, parce que c'est un monde de l'universalité des hommes." [12]

NOTES

[1] R. Chickering, "Total War: The Use and Abuse of a Concept", in Manfred F. Boemeke, Roger Chickering, and Stig Förster (eds.), *Anticipating Total War: the German and American Experiences, 1871-1914* (Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute, 1999), pp. 13-28; R. Chickering and S. Förster (eds), *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front* (Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute, 2000); and J.-Y. Guiomar, *L'invention de la guerre totale* (Paris: Le Félin, 2004). See also the bibliography of Bell's book and pp. 8-16.

[2] Guiomar, *L'invention de la guerre totale*, p. 13. His conclusion is that total war is a strategy or a political concept of civilians and not of the military (p. 302).

[3] Paris: Aubier, 2006. To be fair, Bell does give some examples of militarily tinted cultural events and art works but focuses on the logic of war and on the discussion about war.

[4] Howard Brown, *Ending the French Revolution. Violence, Justice and Repression from the Terror to Napoleon* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006). A good illustration of the (civil) administration of France is given by I. Moullier, *Le ministère de l'Intérieur sous le Consulat et le Premier Empire: Gouverner la France après le 18 Brumaire* (Thèse d'Etat, Université de Lille III, 2004), <http://www.univ-lille3.fr/theses/moullier-igor/html>.

[5] Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1989).

[6] Here, Bell forgets that Napoleon imposed strict rules on his soldiers and that violence against civilians and plundering were in principle forbidden and penalized by death. When he had a village burned and destroyed, as in Italy, it was meant as a dissuasion for others.

[7] A. Martin, *Napoleon, The Novelist* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); L. Mascilli Migliorini, *Le mythe du héros. France et Italie après la chute de Napoléon* (Paris: Nouveau Monde Editions, 2002); A. Jourdan, *Napoléon, héros, imperator, mécène* (Paris: Aubier, 1998); and W. Hanley, *The Genesis of Napoleonic Propaganda, 1796-1799* (<http://www.gutenberg-e.org/haw01>).

[8] A.-M. Rao, "Républiques et monarchies: Une diplomatie nouvelle", *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 2 (1994): 267-78.

[9] Sophie Wahnich, *L'impossible citoyen: L danger dans le discours de la Révolution française* (Paris, Albin Michel, 1997); Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, ed. and trans. G. Schwab (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1976) and *Theorie der Partisanen: Zwischenbemerkung zum Begriff des Politischen* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1988). During the Revolution, there was in fact no absolute enemy because—even for the terrorists—alien people were seen as able to change and to be won over to the cause of Liberty. As in religious wars, the other could be converted. But in the Nazi ideology, the enemy is a race—the Jews. A race cannot be changed or converted...just be destroyed.

[10] J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens. Essai sur la fonction sociale du jeu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951). Social historians of conflicts use his game theory to explain and analyse political conflicts.

[11] Guiomar would add that total war must be the prerogative of politicians (*L'invention de la guerre totale*, p. 302).

[12] François Furet in A. de Baecque (ed.), *Pour ou contre la Révolution: De Mirabeau à Mitterrand* (Paris: Bayard, 2002), p. 23.

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

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