

---

*H-France Forum* Volume 2, Issue 3 (Summer 2007), No. 1

**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 Jeremy D. Popkin, University of Kentucky.

---

Certainly one of the least foreseeable consequences of the U. S. Supreme Court's installation of George W. Bush as president in 2000 was the extent to which his policies would provoke a rethinking of the history of the French revolutionary era. For anyone familiar with that period, Bush's decision to try to bring democracy to Iraq at gunpoint inevitably brought to mind Robespierre's warning that "no one loves armed missionaries," and the current plight of American troops surrounded by a hostile population easily evokes comparisons with Napoleon's "Spanish ulcer." When David Bell berates the Girondins for launching France into war "out of a toxic mixture of ignorance, wishful thinking, and pure, naked ambition," and without any plans for what would happen once the troops went into action (p. 114), one senses that he is not thinking only of events in 1792. *The First Total War* shows that historians' customary strictures against the sin of presentism are not always justified: the confrontation of these two very different eras can generate new perspectives on both the past and the present. The lessons of the past are always ambiguous, however. And it remains a troubling question whether it is truly possible to escape from the culture of total warfare Bell describes in a world as heavily stocked with true weapons of mass destruction as ours.

Bell's thesis, clearly laid out at the beginning of his book, is that the revolutionary era created a new culture of warfare, one in which war was seen as a condition completely separated from normal human existence, in which soldiers were sharply separated from civilians, and in which the goal of eliminating war paradoxically justified its prosecution with the most extreme methods. The wars of the revolutionary era thus foreshadowed the "total wars" of the twentieth century as well as the current imbroglio in the Middle East. Despite Bell's subtitle, Napoleon is not the central figure in his story. The "little corporal" was merely the most brilliant practitioner of the new form of warfare created by the revolutionaries of the 1790s, particularly the Girondins and the brutal revolutionary commanders in the Vendée. Napoleon, in Bell's view, simply systematized these changes and profited from the new situation to elevate himself to power.

Bell's argument begins with a familiar contrast between the relatively limited European conflicts of the eighteenth century and the more extensive wars that began in 1792. The innovation in his construction of this contrast is his argument that what kept eighteenth-century warfare limited was not the spread of Enlightenment values but rather an aristocratic ethos that defined combat as a theater for the display of gentlemanly "splendor, courage, and honor" (p. 44), not as an all-out effort to annihilate an enemy. As Bell is well aware, the gentlemanly warfare of the eighteenth century was something of an anomaly and also something of an illusion. European rulers were not anxious to repeat the excesses of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century religious conflicts, but the gloves came off when eighteenth-century armies confronted opponents they classified as uncivilized, such as the Highland Scots, whom the British army massacred at Culloden. Furthermore, as Bell himself admits, common soldiers' experiences of battle in the eighteenth century could be every bit as brutal and painful as those of their revolutionary-era successors. Aristocratic officers might alternate days in the field with evenings in the ballroom or at the writing desk--Bell makes much of the number of military officers who were also men of letters--but their men faced a very different kind of existence. Prior to the revolutionary era, however, very few common soldiers' experiences were recorded.

A long tradition of writing about warfare, dating back to the eighteenth century itself, pilloried kings and aristocrats as the villains who promoted war, indifferent to the suffering it caused, and hailed the philosophes as progressive humanitarians for denouncing war's irrationality. Bell turns this argument on its head: having argued that aristocratic culture kept warfare under control, he then maintains that it was the civilian thinkers of the period who, by stigmatizing war as "an unnatural aberration" (p. 67), inadvertently opened the door to an unlimited kind of war waged in the name of bringing about perpetual peace. Fénelon's immensely popular *Telemachus*, a best-seller throughout the century, made an essentially Christian pacifist argument against warfare; the secular writers of the Enlightenment argued that national quarrels were atavistic and that commerce was binding the world together in ways that would make armed conflict obsolete. Whereas authors like Fénelon and Voltaire condemned war in principle, Rousseau and other pre-romantic writers saw the limited warfare of their day as a sign of decadence and corruption and praised the virtues of a more strenuous, nationalistic kind of fighting. The total wars of the revolutionary era would, in Bell's argument, emerge out of these conflicting condemnations of limited, aristocratic warfare rather than out of the "war culture" of the Old Regime.

In his discussion of the revolutionary period, Bell again inverts the conventional wisdom. Whereas the Constituent Assembly is usually remembered for its high-minded renunciation of war, Bell points out that its famous condemnation of offensive war in 1790 was coupled with a warning that the country would observe no restraints if it had to defend itself. At times, this argument seems to be leading Bell in a Burkean direction, as when he singles out the *monarchien* Malouet's defense of the king's warmaking powers as the most intelligent contribution to the Constituent Assembly's debate on the question (p. 101). Could the revolutionaries have adopted what Bell would regard as a realistic attitude toward the place of war, which presumably would have meant allowing the king to retain real authority and tolerating the continued influence of the aristocracy from which the officer corps was drawn? In view of the king's attempt to use the army to quash the revolutionary movement in July 1789, it is difficult to imagine such an outcome. Bell has perhaps underestimated the degree to which the opponents of the Revolution drove its supporters to embrace what turned out to be dangerously radical notions about remaking the army and the nature of warfare.

Moving on through the revolutionary decade and into the Napoleonic period, Bell focuses particularly on the folly of the Girondin conviction that foreign populations would regard the French as liberators and on those episodes—the Vendée uprising, the Calabrian revolts of 1799 and 1806, and finally the war in Spain—in which French troops found themselves confronted with uncompromising guerrilla movements. As Bell shows how these confrontations resulted in a kind of "exterminatory" violence (p. 160), he is again clearly thinking of the American occupation in Iraq. The unlimited warfare of the revolutionary period resulted not only in spiraling violence but in the undermining of democratic political institutions in France. Bell blames this development, like the worst excesses of utopianism, on the hapless Girondins, identifying their favorite general, Dumouriez, as the prototype of the army commander tempted to convert his authority over his troops into political power. Dumouriez's attempt to overthrow the Convention in 1793 failed, but he foreshadowed Napoleon, whose seizure of power on 18 brumaire VIII was, Bell claims, the "first military coup d'état of modern times" (p. 12).

Napoleon, who evolved from a bookish young officer brought up in the Old Regime's tradition of aristocratic combat to a politicized proponent of the Jacobins and then to a typically cynical Directory-era general devoted to acquiring military glory for himself, exemplifies for Bell the transformations of the period. By the time of the Egyptian expedition in 1798, Bonaparte was ready to undertake a "reglorification of war...centered on the notion that war might prove a regenerative, redemptive experience for individuals, as well as societies" (p. 207). Although Bell argues that Napoleon was not necessarily bent on world conquest from the outset, he nevertheless found himself trapped in a cycle of "war without end" (p. 222), requiring ever-larger armies and ever-greater resources and inspiring ever more intense opposition in the territories he occupied. Total war ultimately consumed its most talented proponent, although, curiously, when the Allies finally invaded France in 1814, they eschewed the kind

of devastating campaign the French had often engaged in: after two decades of the kind of fighting Bell describes, the final decision in the conflict was brought about by something that resembled the limited warfare of the eighteenth century.

Bell's briskly written narrative joins a number of other recent studies that have argued for the centrality of the military, war and violence in the revolutionary era, including the works of Alan Forrest, Jean-Paul Bertaud, Howard Brown, and Jean-Clément Martin.[1] The originality of Bell's argument is his insistence on treating "war as a meaningful and dynamic activity in its own right," an autonomous sphere of human activity "exerting profound and complex effects on politics and culture..." (p. 10). Here he differs, for example, from the international relations scholar Chimène Keitner, whose recent book, *The Paradoxes of Nationalism: The French Revolution and its Meaning for Contemporary Nation Building*, also sees important parallels between revolutionary France and contemporary American foreign policy.[2] For Keitner, however, the expansive tendencies of the Revolution grew not out of a rejection of the aristocratic model of warfare but out of tensions inherent in the revolutionary notion of the nation-state, which led the French to reject the legitimacy of other forms of political organization and to assert their right, and even their duty, to bring the blessings of republicanism to their neighbors. Bell explicitly rejects this emphasis on ideology, pointing out, among other things, that the period's warfare reached its height under Napoleon, who abandoned all pretence of exporting universalistic democratic values. Whereas Bell concludes that warfare is a part of human existence, and that our best hope is to try to keep it within limits, Keitner's argument implies that democratic nation-states are inherently driven to try to universalize their principles, suggesting that a return to the ritualized conflicts of the Old Regime is not really possible.

In addition to the question of whether "war culture" should be regarded as a largely autonomous factor in the revolutionary period, Bell's book raises the question of whether the revolutionary conflicts were in fact total wars, in the sense that the term has come to have since 1914. The embattled revolutionaries of 1792-1794 certainly used a rhetoric of total mobilization, but, as Bell acknowledges, they lacked the means to make projects like the *levée en masse* a reality. The period's weaponry was considerably less destructive than that deployed in twentieth-century conflicts, and only in extreme circumstances such as the Vendée and Spain were whole populations deliberately targeted. Bell sees the casualty totals in Napoleon's conflicts as comparable to the losses in the world wars, but the military historian Owen Connelly has argued that in fact the casualties of that period were much less devastating, at least until the final years of the Empire, and that even then the shock was cushioned because as many as half of the dead were drawn from non-French territories.[3] In sharp contrast to the situation during and after the First World War, France's population continued to grow both during and after these conflicts. "Total" in comparison to the conflicts of the eighteenth century, the revolutionary wars were nevertheless still limited when viewed from a twentieth-century perspective.

After the confident sweep of Bell's argument, it is something of a surprise to find him qualifying many of his arguments and raising some doubtful claims in his brief epilogue. As he acknowledges, in the nineteenth century, the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars gave way not to ever more apocalyptic conflicts but to the longest period of relative peace in European history, one that allowed optimistic illusions about the end of warfare to take root again. The connection between the revolutionary era and the total wars of the twentieth century is thus not as self-evident as Bell implies. His assertion that "the pattern of military intervention in political life, which had begun in its modern form in France in 1795-99, became a commonplace of European history" (p. 312) seems strained: outside of Iberia, Marshal Pilsudski's Poland in 1926, and the Greek colonels in 1967, how often in modern European history have military men toppled an established government? Bell cites the Dreyfus Affair as an example, but it led to the disgrace of the misbehaving generals, not to the overthrow of the Third Republic. Similarly, Bell's claim that American public attitudes toward war "have come more and more to resemble those of the Europeans of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras" (p. 314) seems curious at a moment when every poll shows an insistent demand for an end to our intervention in Iraq. And, as he admits, despite

the heated rhetoric of the “war on terrorism,” the Iraq intervention, however calamitous, has been distinctly limited. The American government has not even tried to mobilize the full resources of this country to support the campaign, and the worst atrocities are now being inflicted by Iraqis on each other rather than by American troops (p. 316).

Despite the many thoughtprovoking parallels between past and present that Bell suggests, his book is also ultimately inconclusive with regard to the lessons we can draw from the revolutionary era for the understanding of the Iraq crisis. Whether the decision to invade Iraq was really a consequence of a democratic “war culture” or rather the result of a subversion of American democratic institutions, it hardly seems to have generated enthusiasm for further war-making ventures, or to have set the stage for the rise of an American Napoleon. After the excesses of our current president, most Americans are probably ready for a foreign policy conducted with greater prudence and realism. Anyone who keeps up with the news, however, has to wonder whether a world so generously supplied with causes of conflict and weapons of mass destruction can be brought to accept a culture of limited warfare. The diplomats of the Congress of Vienna managed to put the genie of total war back in its bottle for nearly a century; it is a measure of the intensity of our current crisis that such an accomplishment now seems impossible to imagine. However stimulating Bell’s analysis of the changes in warfare during the revolutionary era may be, it is not clear that it offers any concrete suggestions for working ourselves out of this situation.

---

#### NOTES

[1] Alan Forrest, *Napoleon’s Men: The Soldiers of the Revolution and Empire* (New York: Hambledon and London, 2002); Jean-Paul Bertaud, *The Army of the French Revolution*, trans. R. R. Palmer (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988); Howard G. Brown, *Ending the French Revolution: Violence, Justice, and Repression from the Terror to Napoleon* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006); and Jean-Clément Martin, *Violence et Révolution* (Paris: Seuil, 2006).

[2] Chimène Keitner, *The Paradoxes of Nationalism: The French Revolution and its Meaning for Contemporary Nation Building* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

[3] Owen Connelly, *The French Revolution and Napoleonic Era*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1991), pp. 232-33.

Jeremy Popkin  
University of Kentucky  
popkin@email.uky.edu

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

Copyright © 2007 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

*H-France Forum* Volume 2, Issue 3 (Summer 2007), No. 1

ISSN 1557-7058