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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 Jeremy Black, University of Exeter.

“Why bother with Napoleon?” were the opening words of my presentation to the first Gunther Rothenberg seminar on military history, held in November 2006, and it was therefore with particular interest that I read David Bell’s new book. Extravagantly puffed on the back cover, this work might seem a surprising shift for the author of *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), but the two are actually closely linked as they are both histories of ideas. As the earlier book showed, Bell is an adept scrutinizer of the language of power, is adroit at studying shifts in ideas, and is keen on the notion of essential concepts. Unfortunately, this approach offered only a partial account of the nature, as opposed to language, of identity.

So also with the new book. The claims are bold. Apparently “mainstream historians” have ignored the centrality of war, an assertion that is highly surprising at best and that tells us more about certain American coteries in the field of French history than it does about the field as a whole. In the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic period, Bell claims, the military transformations have been studied mostly from an operational viewpoint, and the centrality of culture to them has been neglected, an argument that has a degree more weight, although it is more exaggeration than accuracy. Bell arrestingly seeks to fill the alleged gap by arguing that “the intellectual transformations of the Enlightenment, followed by the political fermentation of 1789-92, produced new understandings of war that made possible the cataclysmic intensification of the fighting over the next twenty-three years. Ever since, the same developments have shaped the way Western societies have seen and engaged in military conflict” (p. 9).

This argument seems necessary to Bell because, greatly underplaying the extent to which there was continuity with ancien regime conflict, he feels he has to explain something new, warfare that was at once total and modern, a major intensification from the conflict of the ancien regime. Thus, he sees from 1792 a “political dynamic that drove the participants relentlessly *toward* [his italic] a condition of total engagement and the abandonment of restraints” (p. 8). Unsurprisingly, therefore, there is much on the Vendée and on the treatment of captives in Spain. There is also some interesting material on the rhetoric of conflict, particularly, but not only, in France, while Bell suggests that Napoleon’s cult of heroism and the reception to it grew directly out of new understandings of the human self that were emerging in the late Enlightenment and Revolutionary period.

Unfortunately, Bell does not devote much space to investigating other approaches. He could have considered revisions in our understanding of ancien regime warfare that stress the extent to which it was far from indecisive or limited, not least in the treatment of civilians. This is a major theme in the specialist literature, but Bell needs a theme of “the eighteenth-century age of military restraint” (p. 50) in order to provide a counterpoint to his own subject and thus to provide a contrast that requires analysis in terms of dramatic contrast. Instead, his approach repeats outdated, formulaic descriptions. It is rather as if he explained the French Revolution in terms of class action. Bell might have discussed the ability of powers to avoid “total engagement”: Prussia spent the years from 1795 to 1806 at peace with

France and was far from alone in being willing and able to negotiate agreements. The rhetoric of “total engagement” was frequently misleading as Paul Schroeder has shown.[1]

More significantly, the description of modern warfare in terms of large-scale conflict by ideologically committed forces is a seriously flawed one. Moving forward from 1815, it does not describe, for example, many of the conflicts of the 1820s, and this should undermine any sense that Napoleonic conflict had transformed warfare and brought forward modernity. A key characteristic of modern warfare is its variety, not least in scale, goal, and intensity, rather than its conformity to an essential set of characteristics as Bell misleadingly suggests. Moreover, if modern warfare is not necessarily total, total warfare is not necessarily modern. The goal of apocalyptic violence, and the means to that end of violence, scarcely had to wait for modern times, as a reading of Mongol warfare or that of Timur would indicate. Total war can therefore be separated from any developmental model of conflict. As far as naval or European overseas warfare were concerned, France was not a key model for military change. That it was not so suggests the need to move aside from an emphasis on land warfare within Europe as if it provides a paradigm even for Western warfare.

At the global scale, it is those powers that took a prominent part in conflict between the West and the non-West that deserve more relative attention, whereas warfare between Western powers is generally overplayed. A different history therefore means devoting more space to Britain, Russia, and the United States and less to that longstanding *ménage à trois* of Austria, France, and Prussia. Moreover, Bell scarcely links developments in European warfare in the late-eighteenth century to the situation in the non-Western world of that period. It is unclear from his text why Napoleon should be regarded as different from such eighteenth-century war leaders as Nader Shah of Persia. Furthermore, in terms of modernity understood in terms of institutional sophistication and effectiveness, the efficiency of the Chinese in overcoming the Dsungars of Xinjiang in the 1750s, the topic of a recent book by Peter Perdue,[2] was far greater than that of Napoleon, not least in avoiding a logistical failure akin to that of the invasion of Russia in 1812. That Europe, or rather, the West, dominated the world in 1900 and even more in 1919 does not mean that a mode of analysis based on this dominance should be applied to the period a century earlier nor that Napoleonic warfare provides a clue to this domination.

If Bell's depiction of his context is deeply flawed, there is nonetheless much of interest in his book on the rhetoric of violence. His linkage of this rhetoric to hopes of peace thereafter is indicative of the recurrence of religious themes in violence, which is scarcely surprising as the French Revolutionary Wars replicated aspects of the early-modern wars of religion, not least in the degree of civil conflict and the extent to which the concept of the civilian was questioned. Ultimately, however, this book is a disappointment because the fertility of the author's critical intellect falls short of the necessary understanding of military history, in particular of the variety of circumstances and the complexity of change.

NOTES

[1] Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[2] Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2005).

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

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