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Michael V. Leggiere, *Napoleon and Berlin: The Franco-Prussian War in North Germany, 1813*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002. 385 pp. \$30.05 (pb). ISBN 0806133996.

Jean-Yves Guiomar, *L'invention de la guerre totale: XVIIIe-XXe siècle*. Paris: Le Félin Kiron, 2004. 329 pp. €20 (pb). ISBN 2866455665.

Review by David A. Bell, The Johns Hopkins University.

For decades, the military history of the revolutionary and Napoleonic periods in France—like much military history in general—has suffered from a strange disconnect. Among its practitioners, some are historians trained in “mainstream” doctoral programs, who relate the subject to broad problems in European politics, society and culture (e.g. Jean-Paul Bertaud, Gilbert Bodinier, Jean Meyer, Tim Blanning, Howard Brown, Rafe Blaufarb...). And then there are historians trained mostly in specialized military history programs, whose concern is primarily with “operational” issues of strategy, tactics and weaponry, and with the experience of combat (e.g. David Chandler, John Lynn, Gunther Rothenberg, Owen Connelly, Jon Elting, Donald Horward...). Some of the latter—notably John Lynn—have made interesting efforts to cross the gap, and to explore issues of interest to social and cultural historians, but most have not.[1] Meanwhile, most mainstream historians of the period remain woefully ignorant of military history altogether, despite the massive significance of warfare for France between 1792 and 1815. The “new cultural history” of the period, pioneered by Lynn Hunt, has taken surprisingly little interest in things military, despite the obvious relevance of war to such topics as masculinity, the family, or national identity. From a cultural perspective, the most interesting work on revolutionary-era military topics has been coming from Germany, particularly scholars influenced by Reinhart Koselleck and Carl Schmitt. Some of these (notably Michael Jeismann, in his Schmittian *Das Vaterland der Feinde*) have ventured across the Rhine, but most have remained within the bounds of Germany itself.[2] There is, as yet, no French equivalent to Karen Hagemann’s pioneering study of gender, politics and war in Napoleonic-era Prussia, “*Männliche Muth und Deutsche Ehre*”.[3] It should also be noted that in France itself, “operational” military history of this period has languished close to extinction for a very long time, with the result that the subject has become something of an Anglo-American monopoly.

Never has the disconnect been more visible than in the two books under review. In theory, they deal with much the same topic: the Franco-German military conflict of the period. True, they do so on very different scales: Michael Leggiere examines a single set of campaigns, while Jean-Yves Guiomar takes the entire subject, vast to start with, and makes it the centerpiece of a sweeping essay on the theme of modern “total war.” But, in fact, scale is the least of the differences. These two books have almost nothing in common, and the distance between them vividly illustrates the hurdles we face if we are ever to reintegrate warfare into the study of a period which, like our own, dreamed of perpetual peace, only to plunge into seemingly perpetual war.

Michael Leggiere has written a military history in the classic style, and his book illustrates the classic merits and weaknesses of the form. It is a narrative history of the Napoleonic wars in northern Germany in 1813, centered on the essential operational question of why Napoleon lost them. It is hardly an unimportant question. Had the emperor not been forced back across the Rhine after his catastrophic defeat at the “Battle of the Nations” at Leipzig in October, his empire would most likely have survived several more years, at the very least, and the entire history of nineteenth-century Europe might have taken a very different course. To explain the defeat, Leggiere highlights Napoleon’s “striking deviation”

from his own principles of war (p. 286). Rather than trying to force a climactic battle in which he could destroy the enemy armies, the emperor divided his army, remaining in Saxony with part of it, while sending less-competent subordinates to seize Berlin. Not only did they fail at this task, in doing so they gave the Prussians crucial time to mobilize their population, in a German version of the *levée en masse*, and to bring in the critical support of Sweden, now led by Napoleon's former comrade in arms, Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte. In short, the war was lost, in large part, by an "error in judgment" (p. 287). The book also has an extended analysis of the Prussian mobilization, in which a determined party of reformers compelled reluctant king Friedrich Wilhelm III to adopt some of the methods of his French adversaries. Even before 1813, in the wake of the catastrophic defeat by Napoleon in 1806-1807, Prussia had undertaken measures to emancipate serfs, weaken guilds, introduce free trade, and open up the officer corps. In the spring of 1813, the king then created a *Landwehr* and *Landsturm* (home army and home guard), in which all males between the ages of seventeen and sixty were required to serve. Leggiere notes, however, that thanks to conservative opposition, this attempt to create a nation in arms ended up furthering the progress of Prussian militarism far more than it did any incipient egalitarianism.

Leggiere writes clearly and briskly, and has a talent for sketching out operations economically. Even non-specialists will find his narrative easy to follow (the many well-drawn maps also help in this regard). On the German side, he has drawn effectively on little-used primary sources, especially the private papers of General Friedrich Wilhelm von Bülow, governor of East and West Prussia and Lithuania, a key figure in the story. Given that the last thorough treatment of these campaigns, by Francis Loraine Petre, appeared no less than ninety-three years ago (though twice reprinted since), *Napoleon and Berlin* is, in many ways, seriously overdue.[4]

But the book also has limitations, particularly given Leggiere's stated goal of "combin[ing] a social-historical perspective with traditional operational history" (p. x). Start with the remarkable fact that the bibliography lists exactly one secondary work in French published since World War II. Leggiere does not seem to have consulted any books or articles by Jean Tulard, the prolific dean of Napoleonic studies in France, or by Jean-Paul Bertaud, whose work has done so much to reinvigorate studies of the revolutionary-era military. For that matter, despite the title *Napoleon and Berlin*, Leggiere does not seem to have consulted a single biography of Napoleon. There are also important omissions on the German side, starting with James Sheehan's standard history of Germany in this period.[5] In general, Leggiere has relied almost exclusively on a narrow range of primary sources, and on the works of other operational military historians.

Is this necessarily a flaw, for an operational history? Hasn't Leggiere used the proper intellectual tools for understanding how the armies moved and clashed? In a limited sense, yes. But it has been nearly thirty years since John Keegan provided his great critique of the narrative tradition in military history, and "the typical 'battle piece,' with its reduction of soldiers to pawns, its discontinuous rhythm, its conventional imagery, its selective incident and its high focus on leadership." [6] Keegan, a military historian himself, emphasized just how artificial, and falsely coherent a picture such narratives give of military operations, how much they end up reproducing the point of view of the commanders, and how little they say about what the soldiers actually saw and experienced. Leggiere's book very much treats the soldiers as pawns—he quotes hardly any memoirs or letters by ordinary soldiers, although such sources exist in abundance from 1813. And the vision of the campaigns that emerges from the book is very much the one of the commanders: of Bonaparte and his marshals, of Bernadotte, of Bülow.

The result is that, on the French side, the book gives very little sense of the condition and the morale of Napoleon's *Grande Armée* in 1813. Leggiere alludes only very briefly to the epochal disaster of the Russian campaign of the previous year, in which Napoleon led upwards of 450,000 soldiers across the Niemen river towards Moscow, only to have them annihilated by disease, starvation, Russian

opposition, and the inhumanly ghastly horror of the retreat, in which temperatures fell to as low as 35° Fahrenheit below zero. Less than 100,000 made it out of Russia alive, in what at the time had good claim to the title of greatest military catastrophe in history. In its wake, to fight in Germany, Napoleon had to resort to conscription on a scale not seen in France since his coming to power in 1799. He was forced to rush ill-prepared peasants into uniform at a point when military service was less popular than at any time since the Old Regime, and desperately resisted by ordinary people throughout France.[7] To say, as Leggiere does, that “Napoleon’s conscript army and depleted cavalry did not allow him the mobility to force the allies to accept battle under adverse conditions” (p. 54), hardly begins to describe the situation. Yet one will not get a much better sense of it from the official correspondence on which Leggiere has relied. This correspondence hewed to its own particular conventions, not least the assumptions that the commanders were in full control of their forces, and that they were the equals of their illustrious predecessors. Leggiere also gives the reader very little sense of Napoleon himself during this critical campaign, hardly drawing at all on the many memoirs by his associates, Napoleon’s own reminiscences (the *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène* is not cited, although it has a good deal on the 1813 campaign)—on anything besides the official *Correspondance*. Napoleon therefore appears in the book as a remote, oddly impersonal agent: dictating orders, making cool calculations, and ultimately committing that fatal “error in judgment.” But did even Napoleon have as much control over events as he thought he did? Tolstoy’s judgment on the historiography of the Russian campaign is worth keeping in mind: “The historians provided cunningly devised proofs of the foresight and genius of the generals, who, of all the blind instruments of history, were the most enslaved and involuntary.”[8]

None of this is meant to disprove Leggiere’s thesis, which seems plausible to me, or to denigrate the obvious importance of commanders to military history, still less to suggest that the events of 1813 are best understood by recourse to a Tolstoyan notion of fatality. It is also worth noting that Leggiere does a much more thorough job of filling out the story on the Prussian side, where his greatest expertise lies. There he comes closer to fulfilling his ambitious goal of melding social and operational history. In short, Leggiere has told, and told well, an important part of the story. But it is still only a part, even if its sources have a tendency to make it appear the whole. Without the rest—the condition of the army, the experiences of the soldiers, the economic and social condition of the contending powers, and, for that matter, the cultural meanings they attributed to the wars—we cannot fully grasp why things happened as they did. But to embrace this whole means precisely to break out of the bounds of “operational” military history narrowly defined, and to situate the operations within a general history of the era, the way Bertaud or Blanning have done. Of course, it would also help if generalists, in their turn, paid more attention to the military operations of what was, in many ways, the first great period of modern “total war.”

One generalist who has now taken this step is Jean-Yves Guiomar, in his pleasantly quirky, thought-provoking, and often brilliant book *L’invention de la guerre totale*. Guiomar is not a military historian by training, having previously published two interesting and well-respected essays on nationalism, and a study of Breton historiography.[9] His new book ranges widely over everything from the treaty of Tordesillas in 1494 to the German defeat of 1945, making it hard to characterize (and, occasionally, a little hard to follow). Still, Guiomar focuses on the period of the revolutionary wars, and particularly on the Franco-German conflicts, in which he sees the origins of “total war.” This is a phenomenon which he defines, following modern students of the subject like Roger Chickering, by three criteria: it involves attempts at a complete mobilization of society for war; its participants reject any outcome other than the complete destruction of the adversary; and it tends towards the erasing of boundaries between professional soldiers and civilians (pp. 13-14).[10]

Guiomar is hardly the first historian to characterize the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars as “total” wars. Blanning and Chickering have both done so in recent years, as Guiomar acknowledges (he even quotes Chickering’s overly dramatic verdict on the subject: “...the transition from Valmy to Hiroshima

thus proceeds with an inherent and ineluctable logic...”, p. 300).^[11] But he has his own original and enlightening perspective on the subject, which does not highlight the experience of total war itself, so much as the conditions under which war *becomes* total. His concern, one might say, is with the radicalization of war, a topic which has obvious parallels to the radicalization of revolutionary politics in the same period.

Guiomar starts by posing a surprising question. When France declared war on Austria in April, 1792, what strategic goals did its leadership have in mind? Historians of the period have devoted enormous efforts to elucidating the *political* goals of the advocates of war: for the Girondins, the unification of the country under their own leadership, for the king and his supporters, an end to the Revolution following upon what they believed would be an inevitable French defeat. It is also well known that at least some Girondins hoped that no sooner would French troops cross the border than the peoples of Germany and the Austrian Netherlands would surrender, fall rapturously at the feet of their liberators, and help spread the Revolution across the world (recently, certain Washington policy-makers have suffered from strikingly similar delusions). But failing this outcome, what did the military leadership actually hope to accomplish in the field? Even the operational military historians, who have described the subsequent campaigns in great detail, have written little on the subject. And the reason, Guiomar argues, is that in fact the French did not *have* clear military goals. Of course they wanted to punish Austria for supporting counter-revolutionary *émigrés*, and to put pressure on it. But what would this pressure entail? The striking fact is that the French army never defined its goals: “apart from some sonorous rhetoric, the war had absolutely no direction, and apparently no one cared” (p. 36).

To be sure, when the initial thrusts into the Austrian Netherlands turned into a humiliating fiasco, and the Duke of Brunswick’s Prussian army pushed into eastern France, the war quickly acquired a clear goal: national survival. But after the revolutionary forces stopped Brunswick at Valmy, and General Dumouriez marched into Brussels after the victory of Jemappes, the problem presented itself again: what was France fighting for? Some revolutionary leaders remained fixated on the threat posed by conspiratorial *émigrés*. Others warmed to the idea of a war of universal liberation (said Danton: “we have the right to tell peoples: you will have no more kings”, quoted on p. 51). Still others came to insist on the idea that France should expand to its “natural frontier” of the Rhine. But overall, the goals remained “vast and vague” (p. 19).

This quality, Guiomar argues, quickly made the war uncontrollable. Without clear military goals, the victorious French armies had no obvious place to stop: no obvious point at which to cease hostilities, consolidate their goals, and turn matters over to the diplomats (a category of person who in any case barely existed during the radical Revolution, when France maintained diplomatic relations only with the United States and Switzerland). Furthermore, the decision to annex new territories—which had been taken even before the war with the absorption of Avignon and the Comtat Venaissin—gave the Republic every incentive to march even further, so as to protect France’s newly-swollen borders. As Guiomar keenly observes, the securing of the “natural frontier” of the Rhine in the 1790’s only made it more important to ensure effective French control of the territories beyond, in the Netherlands and Germany. It prompted the creation of the Batavian Republic in 1795, and, a decade later, Napoleon’s Confederation of the Rhine.

Ultimately, it led to the wholesale annexations of the later empire, under which even the city of Hamburg became French territory, as part of the newly-created *département de l’Elbe*. This radical attempt to reorganize “the German space”(p. 86), on a scale not known since Charlemagne, prompted increasingly fervent opposition from the Germans themselves, culminating in the so called “War of Liberation” of 1813 described by Leggiere, in which Friedrich Wilhelm famously proclaimed his own

version of the *levée en masse*, instructing his people to “oppose the enemy with all available weapons [...] and] harm them with all available means.”[12]

What Guimar accomplishes through his emphasis on uncontrollable radicalization is to suggest that it makes little sense to see the wars of 1792-1815 from a Clausewitzian perspective: that is to say as instruments employed in the service of specific strategic or geopolitical goals. Because definite goals of this sort did not exist (at least on the French side), the wars were not instrumental, but ends in their own right, their completion deferred indefinitely into the future. In this respect, I would add, revolutionary understandings of war come eerily to resemble revolutionary understandings of “revolution” itself, particularly as elucidated in the work of Keith Michael Baker.[13] Guimar’s is a perspective starkly at odds with most operational military histories of the period, which, besides revering Clausewitz, tend to analyze the wars as instrumental phenomena.

This is not to say, of course, that the wars were not political phenomena. But they were political in the sense of internal, ideological politics, not the international, “state relations” sort of politics that Clausewitz had in mind. Indeed, Guimar makes the important observation that “total war” is far more a political phenomenon of this sort than a military one. The most famous calls for it in modern history have come from political leaders, not generals: the Girondins in 1792, Friedrich Wilhelm (at the behest of the Prussian reformers) in 1813, Rathenau in 1918, Hitler and Goebbels in 1943. But it is precisely the vast and indefinable scope of “total war”—very much unlike instrumental wars fought to achieve specific geopolitical objectives—which leads the actual operations, as well as the rhetoric, to spiral out of control.

Guimar does not try to make this case through an exhaustive survey of modern warfare. He devotes one long chapter to the outbreak of the wars, concentrating particularly on the fascinating figure of Charles-François Dumouriez, the general who served as the Girondin Minister of Foreign Affairs throughout much of the build-up to war, helped command French forces at Valmy, won the victory at Jemappes, and then ended up defecting to the Austrians after the *journées* of May 31-June 2, 1793. Two more long chapters then pursue the question of German reorganization, sweeping from the Napoleonic Empire, through the period of unification, and rapidly touching on the world wars as well. It is an eclectic, idiosyncratic approach, and not always perfectly successful. It does not pay enough attention to the fact that under the Directory and Napoleon, the concept of *raison d'état* reasserted itself in French thinking, and French military policy arguably became far more oriented towards specific strategic goals.[14] And by the time Guimar has reached the later period, he tends to rely on suggestive assertion more than on a thorough engagement with the sources. For the earlier period, he has an excellent command of the material, but still relies very heavily on French historians associated with the Institut de l'Histoire de la Révolution Française, and American historians of France. He has not made much use of the Anglo-American operational histories, and tends to rely on somewhat dated French accounts, particularly by the popular turn-of-the-last century author Arthur Chuquet (who is, admittedly, irresistibly readable and reasonably accurate). Guimar has also done little with the voluminous recent German scholarship on the culture of war. His conclusion, rather than returning to what he sees as the Revolution’s moment of original sin, instead sets off on an interesting summary of Carl Schmitt’s *Der Nomos der Erde*, which he does not relate thoroughly enough to his earlier chapters (a more thorough engagement with the German historiography might have forced him to do so).

Nonetheless, this is explicitly an essay, not an exhaustive survey, and on these terms it succeeds marvelously well. Consistently thought-provoking, Guimar offers a genuinely new perspective on a much-trodden subject, even if he lacks Michael Leggiere’s impressively intimate command of the military operations themselves. His book, which has received regrettably little attention in France so far, is one that no historian of the period should miss. It also prompts the thought that what the history

of this period needs is historians who can combine the strengths of both these books. Only then will we be able to close the artificial and unprofitable divide between operational history and the “mainstream.”

NOTES

[1] See, for instance, John A. Lynn, “Toward an Army of Honor: The Moral Evolution of the French Army, 1789-1815,” *French Historical Studies*, 16/1(1989):152-73; *idem*, “Guerre et culture, ‘Lumières’ et Romantisme dans la pensée militaire,” in Michel Biard, Annie Crépin and Bernard Gainot, eds., *La plume et le sabre: Volume d’hommages offerts à Jean-Paul Bertaud* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2002), pp. 327-44.

[2] Michael Jeismann, *Der Vaterland der Feinde: Studien zum nationalen Feindbegriff und Selbstverständnis in Deutschland und Frankreich, 1792-1918* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1992). See also Wolfgang Kruse, *Die Erfindung des modernen Militarismus: Krieg, Militär und bürgerliche Gesellschaft im politischen Diskurs der Französischen Revolution 1789-1799* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2003).

[3] Karen Hagemann, “Männlicher Muth und Teutsche Ehre”: *Nation, Militär und Geschlecht zur Zeit der Antinapoleonischen Kriege Preußens* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2002). See also the essays collected in Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann and John Tosh, eds., *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

[4] Francis Loraine Petre, *Napoleon’s Last Campaign in Germany 1813* (London: John Lane, 1912). It was reprinted by Arms and Armour Press in 1974, and Greenhill Books in 1992.

[5] James J. Sheehan, *German History 1770-1866* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).

[6] John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme* (New York: Viking, 1976), p. 61.

[7] See Alan Forrest, *Conscripts and Deserters: The Army and French Society during the Revolution and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 41-42.

[8] Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 896.

[9] *L’idéologie nationale; nation, représentation, propriété* (Paris: Champs Libre, 1974); *La nation entre l’histoire et la raison* (Paris: La Découverte, 1990); *Le bretonisme: Les historiens bretons au XIXe siècle* (Mayenne: Société d’histoire et d’archéologie de Bretagne, 1987).

[10] Chickering and Stig Förster have edited a series of studies, published by the German Historical Institute, on total war since 1871.

[11] See also T. C. W. Blanning, *The French Revolutionary Wars, 1787-1802* (London: Arnold, 1996), pp. 16, 101. [12] Ernst Rudolf Huber, ed., *Dokumente zur deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte*, three vols. (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1961), vol. I, p. 15.

[13] See Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 203-223.

[14] On this subject, see Marc Belissa, *Fraternité universelle et intérêt national (1713-1795): Les cosmopolitiques du droit des gens* (Paris: Editions Kimé, 1998).

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