



**David A. Bell.** *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It.* Houghton Mifflin: New York, 2007. \$27.00, 0-618-34965-0.

Reviewed by **Charles J. Esdaile** and **Charles S. Maier**, with a response from the author.  
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Review by **Charles J. Esdaile**, University of Liverpool

**T**he Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars of 1793-1815 were beyond doubt one of the most cataclysmic experiences in European history. A higher proportion of the population was mobilised for military service than had ever been the case before; the dead ran into many millions; the swathe of destruction left by the fighting ran from Lisbon to Moscow; the number of battles soared in relation to the number generated by previous conflicts; the economy of Europe was both shattered and transformed; in many states feudalism was abolished and new systems of administration introduced that were designed to cope with the demands of the new warfare; and, finally, the frontiers of the Continent were shifted to and fro with kaleidoscopic rapidity to an extent that has never yet been equalled. It is, then, somewhat surprising that what may be deemed the literature of analysis is so sparse. There is, of course, a wide range of works on Napoleonic Europe - obvious examples come from the pens of Alexander Grab, Geoffrey Ellis, Stuart Woolf and Michael Broers - while studies on the French Revolution are available by the hundred (though there are few continent-wide investigations of the impact of the Revolution outside France or comparisons of the various satellite republics founded by the Revolution). But, if one looks for something other than straight narrative history, on the wars themselves there is very little. Tim Blanning has contributed a splendid volume on the French Revolutionary Wars, whilst both the current author and David Gates have published extended discussions of the conflicts of 1803-1815, but on the full sweep of the period from Valmy to Waterloo there is almost nothing other than Geoffrey Ellis' *War and Society in Revolutionary Europe, 1770-1870* (London: Fontana, 1982). In consequence, any book that sets out to discuss the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars *en tout* ought to be given a warm welcome, and all the more so when it is as interesting and thought-provoking as David Bell's *The First Total War*.

Let us begin with Bell's argument. Helpfully enough, this is neatly summarised by the author in his introduction. Thus: 'The intellectual transformations of the Enlightenment, followed by the political fermentation of 1789, 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) From this it follows that there are two parts to Bell's position. First of all, we learn that the years 1792-1815 witnessed a massive intensification of European warfare as a political, social and military phenomenon - a process, indeed, that acquired such impetus that Bell does not hesitate in saying, 'This,

then, was the first total war.’ (p. 7). And, second, we discover that the roots of the new warfare lay not so much in such factors as new developments in the art of war, population growth, the evolution of technology, the growth in commerce and, more particularly, the steady accumulation of colonial wealth, improvements in agriculture, the gradual emergence of the modern state, or the ideological tension that – supposedly, at least – threw up an unbridgeable divide between France and the rest of Europe, as in changes that had developed in the way that war was seen in the years prior to the French Revolution.

In so far as the first part of this argument is concerned, there can be little in the way of disagreement in so far as the issue of intensification is concerned. It is possible to introduce something in the way of qualification, perhaps – not only is it probable that a larger proportion of the French populace was mobilised for war under Louis XIV than was to be the case under Napoleon, but the number of combatants deployed in the chief battles of the 1790s actually fell in relation to those who fought in those of the Seven Years’ War. However, in the period of the Empire, especially, the major states of Europe found themselves in the grip of demands for money and manpower that really were quite unprecedented, whilst it is also quite clear that these demands had a strong tendency to escalate – that, in effect, the more resources Britain, France and the rest devoted to the struggle, the more resources they found themselves being forced to commit to it. At the same time, war was, on occasion, undoubtedly waged with greater ferocity than had been seen ever since the days of the Thirty Years War, and accompanied by a torrent of propaganda that sought by every means to increase both hatred of the enemy and popular commitment to the struggle. Again, one might quibble here – Bell, for example, completely ignores the very considerable evidence that, possibly driven by a sense of their common isolation in an environment that was both hostile and alien, the British and French soldiers sent to the Iberian Peninsula developed a strong fellow feeling for one another and engaged in frequent fraternization between the lines – but in the end there is no argument: when the Prussians fell on France in 1814, they did so with a determination and savagery that had far more to do with the Wehrmacht of Adolf Hitler than it did with the grenadiers of Frederick the Great.

However, to argue that war became nastier and more costly is one thing, and to argue that it became total quite another. Here, Bell goes too far. Born, as he argues, in the intellectual debates of the eighteenth century, the concept of total war was certainly very much part of the discourse of the period 1792-1815, but in practice it rarely became a reality. In 1793 the régime of Maximilien Robespierre adopted its techniques – one point that Bell misses here is that the Brissotins were in large brought down precisely because they refused to take such a step and instead remained true to the economic liberalism of 1789 – and for a brief moment France may be said to have been waging a total war. Yet the moment passed, and by the time that Napoleon came to power in 1799 the French war effort was once again the largely the business of an army that was not only entirely separate from the rest of society, but in large part recruited solely from its most vulnerable elements. Nor, except in the dark days of 1814, was any attempt made to resurrect the earlier pattern, one of the chief advantages of the empire from Napoleon’s point of view being that he could wage major land campaigns without having to place excessive strain on the resources of his home base. So far as the French people were concerned, then, what was being waged was

in effect a limited struggle, and it is no coincidence to find that they began to fall away from Napoleon as soon as this situation was compromised. Consider, too, Great Britain. Whilst it is true that she put a larger proportion of her manpower into the field than France, the vast majority of the men concerned were earmarked for home defence and in consequence, never fired a shot in anger, the result being that Britain in effect continued to fight a war using the techniques and methods of the eighteenth century, namely a large navy, a small professional army recruited to a considerable extent from foreign mercenaries, and finally an array of Continental allies purchased by 'Pitt's gold'. And, last but not least, there are Austria, Russia and Prussia, of which only the last can in any sense be said to have mounted a total war against France. In short, despite the rhetoric in which many of their leaders from time to time engaged, the major powers for the most part continued to wage war in the same style as they had in the years before the Revolution, their ability to do so being rendered by the fact that until the very end they would in practice have been ready to settle on a compromise peace that would have left Napoleon on the throne of a France that would certainly have been bigger than that of 1789.

It would appear, then, that there is a hole in Bell's argument, and to fill this he has in effect to make as much as he can of the very special set of campaigns constituted by the war in the Vendée, the Calabrian insurrection of 1806-1810, the Tyrolean insurrection of 1809 and the Peninsular War of 1808-14 (to these might well have been added the Irish 'Year of Liberty' of 1798, this being another campaign which pitched armed civilians against regular armies). Indeed, he attempts to go further by throwing the Russian campaign of 1812 and the German War of Liberation into the same pot, but the fact that he does so is a sure sign of the difficulty in which he at this point begins to find himself, for the forces which harassed the French in guerrilla-fashion in these struggles were in large part composed not of outraged peasants but rather representatives of the armed forces of the state, and what is more troops of a sort that could have been found throughout the eighteenth century. Let us set this matter aside, however, and concentrate on the four campaigns that are at the heart of his argument. These were all beyond doubt affairs which were very different from the conventional struggles that dominated the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. In the Vendée, for example, the *bleus* and their leaders certainly made use of rhetoric which seemed to presage the outright extermination of the rebels and the societies from which they stemmed, just as in Spain and Portugal the discourse of the insurrections was very much that of a crusade in which the invaders would be driven from the soil of the Iberian peninsula and even extirpated altogether. But what Bell fails to bring out is that, despite occasional threats in France to kill all prisoners taken even from more conventional opponents, these were exceptions rather than the norm, and therefore can hardly be held up as paradigms for the war as a whole. Indeed, the extent even of their horror is open to question: good historian that he is, even Bell casts doubt on some of the stories that have circulated in respect of the *colonnes infernales* that were unleashed on the Vendée in the wake of the tragedy of the *grande virée de la galerne*, but he might also have taken the trouble to think further about those coming out of Spain. Most of the atrocity stories that we have in respect of the crimes perpetrated by the Spanish guerrillas come from the memoirs of French soldiers sent to that theatre, and yet these are at the very least open to question in that many can be traced back to a particular set of events that took place in La Mancha in June 1808. Spain and Portugal were bad places to be, certainly, but the depth of

the horror to be found there undoubtedly varied from place to place and from time to time, whilst the many quotes with which Bell supplies in respect of French complaints that they only controlled the ground which they physically occupied can be countered by others in which both British and Spanish officers complain of the apathy of the populace and its increasingly pathetic attempts to live at peace with both sides.

There are, then, many cracks in Bell's argument, but so far we have yet to look at the one that seems to the current author to be the most glaring. In the eighteenth century, we are told, war was coming to be seen by a growing number of thinkers as a phenomenon whose end was nigh, and yet at the same time one that logic was pushing in the direction of ever greater violence. Thus, to be legitimate, war ought to produce decisive results rather than simply changing a frontier here and a border there. What result could be more decisive, though, than the very abolition of war itself, and the establishment in its place of a régime of perpetual peace? From this, however, there stemmed a further issue, and one that was to have dramatic effects. If there really was to be a war to end wars, than at stake was the entire future of Europe, for with the coming of perpetual peace there must seemingly also come a perpetual peace settlement that would necessarily – at least in the concept of the eighteenth century – stand unchallenged for all time. When a general European war broke out in the wake of the French Revolution, the stakes were therefore held to be very high, and in Bell's eyes it is apparently this phenomenon that ensured that the struggle proved to be the total one of his imagination. Thus: 'What marked the conflicts that began in 1792 was not simply their radical new scope and intensity, but also the political dynamic that drove the participants relentlessly towards a condition of total engagement and the abandonment of restraints.' (p. 7) To be blunt, this argument seems dubious in the extreme. In 1787 a conflict that for at time promised to be just as massive as that which followed five years later emerged in eastern Europe with Denmark fighting Sweden, Sweden fighting Russia, and Austria and Russia fighting Turkey. Given that the same thinking was around in 1787 as 1792, why did this struggle not degenerate into a total war *à la Bell*? By rights, it should certainly have done so, but in fact nothing of the sort occurred, and by 1792 it had in fact petered out in a typical eighteenth-century peace settlement. Nor is this surprising, the fact being that there is simply no concrete evidence that any of the monarchs and statesmen who took Europe to war in 1792 and 1793 were moved by thoughts of some Fukuyama-style end of history. As Bell shows, it was certainly on view, most notably in the great debate on the role of war in foreign policy that took place in the French national assembly, but, when it came down to it, all that even Brissot really wanted in 1792 was a straightforward *guerre de cabinet* that would pit France and Prussia against Austria.

To conclude, then, David Bell has written a most stimulating book, and one that is genuinely worthy of consideration, especially as there is much in it that is most original: his views on the rise of Napoleon, for example, are particularly fascinating, and it is a pity that considerations of space do not allow their discussion here. Yet in the end *The First Total War* does not convince, and rather presents an argument that offers numerous hostages to fortune. Primarily a cultural historian, Bell implies in his introduction that he wishes to present 'a systematic overview' of the 'cultural history of war in Napoleon's Europe'. This is fair enough, and as an objective it is one that is achieved with great skill and imagination.

But to advance the claim that somehow the appalling cataclysm of 1792-1815 was primarily the fruit of developments in the world of culture comes over as 'a text too far'. As for the frequent earnest comparisons with the current war in Iraq, these really require a whole new review, but it cannot but be felt that the best one-line response is to quote the words of the author himself, 'Needless to say, the parallels are hardly exact.' (p. 3)

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Review by **Charles S. Maier**, Harvard University

I began this book with a certain skepticism for two principal reasons. First, David Bell was setting out to examine once again one of the most intensely studied and frequently narrated episodes of modern history: the quarter century of wars of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic regime. What more or what new could be added by a synthesis of that epoch? Second, I was suspicious of the conceptual claim: why were the wars of 1792-1815 the first total wars? What constitutes "total war" even if it has become a fashionable term? Let me anticipate my concluding judgment: the narrational skill of Bell's book quickly dissipated my first concern: this is a freshly conceived approach to a history that could easily have seemed routine. But the literary skill of the work has not completely set at ease my second concern.

David Bell, who is a leading historian of eighteenth-century France, has learned the importance of warfare and military history with the zeal of a convert, as his recent *New Republic* critique of the historical profession for neglecting it exemplifies. ("Casualty of War," July 5, 2007) One can differ about this so-called neglect: certainly perusing the bookshelves of any respectable bookstore hardly suggests that war has lost its fascination; and indeed recent publications suggest that academic historians are also returning to the serious study of military history. The author's tendency to fault previous researchers for not seeing what the author has learned was the case is the most annoying tic of his current work, certainly when as a work of synthesis, *The First Total War*, often draws heavily on recent monographic work. "Mainstream historians ...remain surprisingly uninterested in and ignorant of pre-twentieth century military history." (p. 11) "The story of revolutionary France at war...remains surprisingly ill-understood." (p.120). Of course, every historian believes his or her account supersedes the accepted wisdom: otherwise why bother returning to an era or a theme? But earlier less encompassing findings do not necessarily testify to defective intellect.

Happily Bell relies on his own artfully constructed analytical narrative to establish the innovative character of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. He skillfully uses a succession of micro-narratives and carnage to make the vast theaters of war comprehensible. In part he is obviously struck by the comparison with today's Iraq, where we all follow a cruel and misbegotten war one car bomb at a time. Bell takes up the history of the era with his focus, not on the evolution of regimes, nor on the diverse national experiences so transformed by war, but on the nature of warfare itself. And he writes an often brilliant, certainly scarifying narrative of what the military experience was about. He dedicates a major chapter to the debate over war in the French National Assembly during 1790-92 and demonstrates that it was a fundamental and ideologically charged debate both over the constitution and the objectives of warfare. He sketches with considerable nuance the positions of Brissot and the Girondin war party and of Robespierre, the skeptic. Bell then devotes major chapters to the wars of the National Convention, showing the glissando after the first summer's fiasco, through Valmy, to conquest of Belgium and the Rhineland. He skillfully interweaves a complex narrative of the repeated coalitions and their major battles: the conquests of 1794-97; the fantasy-charged Egyptian campaign; then the collapse of the Italian Republics to the Austro-Russian forces of the Second Coalition; thereafter the French reconquest of Italy (1801-1802) and the brief securing of peace even with a shaky British government; and on to the great battles that opened the history of the formally declared French Empire, especially against Austrians, Russians and Prussians (Austerlitz, Jena, Friedland and Eylau, Wagram) and toward the end, a narrative of the ghastly Russian campaign. He alternates the major battle-demarcated sequences with the retail carnage of cruel "low-level" warfare, first in the Vendée, then in Southern Italy, and most famously in Spain.

In effect, Bell constructs his book around the contrast between the endemic but limited warfare of the old regime with the "total war" of the era 1792-1815, waged for socially transformative ends, with ruthless tactics, and by a new species of civilian leader or military commander. As a literary device, the contrast allows an exciting and initially persuasive set of arguments. But to my mind some difficult issues remain despite the undoubted literary skill and bravado of the narrative. Bell devotes considerable effort to contrasting the aristocratic commanders of the old regime – following the Duc de Lauzon, who remained loyal to his country until it guillotined him in the Terror – with the new officers forged by the Revolution. Analysis of Napoleon's military and civil charisma as an exemplification of the "novelistic" sensibility of the Romantic era remains persuasive. Only Wellington, I think gets short changed. Perhaps for a reason: This tough enduring prototype -- "hard pounding, gentlemen; we shall see who pounds harder" -- much like such British commanders as William Slim in World War II, does not lend himself to the dichotomy of aristocrat or charismatic new man: he embodies a type that bridges pre-total war and total war: the professional military man.

An analogous issue emerges, too, in the savage episodes of murderous "low-level" or guerrilla warfare that the author so memorably narrates: first waged in the Vendée, then against the Italian pro-Bourbon forces in southern Italy, and most famously in Spain from 1808 until 1813. Bell borrows – as any scholar now must -- from Charles Esdaile's superb

histories of the Peninsular War and his analysis of the celebrated *guerrilla*<sup>1</sup>. But Esdaile leaves us with a war, which while messy and cruel, can still be inserted into a continuing narrative of warfare: his guerrillas are opportunistic bandits, while the ongoing partisan resistance to French occupation owes more to tough Spanish soldiers who remained active after larger units were defeated. Long wars, wars in which nominally legitimate authorities remain to ask for loyalty and obedience from subjects under foreign troops, lend themselves to widening savagery in every epoch.

Thus more generally I remain skeptical about Bell's use of "total war" and the theoretical argumentation of this work. Bell rightly admits that the term "total war" is not very clear (pp.7-8), but he could do more to clarify it.<sup>2</sup> The idea of total war usually encompasses at least two dimensions, not always differentiated. Early writers implied that total war meant the extensive mobilization of a society in a massive war effort: the war called for by the *levée en masse*, the war of 1793. But many of us might define total war not in terms of the producers of violence, but in terms of its recipients. Total war would thus imply the erasure of the distinction between military and civilians as targets of violence. The second criterion is usually assumed to follow from the first, but it need not. A society might mobilize its society and economy to fight a restrained war; and an army might wage a genocidal conflict without total mobilization. Only a few *Einsatzgruppen* were needed to machine gun about a million and a half Jews in late 1941 and 1942.

Jean-Yves Guiomar, whom Bell cites approvingly, states that the first use of the term "total war" he has found was by French nationalist Léon Daudet in 1918; it became celebrated as the title of General Erich Ludendorff's tract of 1936.<sup>3</sup> Bell (p.8) approvingly cites Guiomar's argument that the fusion of politics and war brings about total war, different from even the most ruthless wars of earlier periods. In fact, Guiomar suggests more precisely that total war is characterized by the fact that its initiators do not know how to end it, because their objectives -- regeneration of the world through violence -- can never be realized. (p. 290)

But while Bell remains vague about what distinguishes total war, he offers a very specific argument as to its etiology after 1792. He believes the phenomenon emerged from the very dream of doing away with all war – of substituting the dream of abolition for the older notion that wars remain a stubborn and recurring component of human history, which, however, can be fought with a code of moderation. "Here, then, is the essential argument of *The First Total War*. The intellectual transformations of the Enlightenment, followed by the

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Esdaile, *The Peninsular War: A New History* (London: Penguin, 2002); and more argumentatively, *Fighting Napoleon: Guerrillas, Bandits and Adventurers in Spain, 1808-1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). See also the results of a conference organized by Esdaile and edited by him: *Popular Resistance in the French Wars: Patriots, Partisans and Land Pirates* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> For salutary caution on the inflationary use of the term see Roger Chickering, "Total War: The Use and Abuse of a Concept," in Manfred Boemeke, R. Chickering, and Stig Förster, eds., *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871-1914* (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute, 1999)

<sup>3</sup> See Jean-Yves Guiomar, *L'invention de la guerre totale, xviii<sup>e</sup>-xx<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Le Félin, 2004); also François Géré and Thierry Widemann, eds., *La Guerre Totale* (Paris: Economica, 2001)

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) The dream of imposing perpetual peace, leads to unrestrained warfare for the very sake of bringing about peace. Wars to end all wars (whether Girondin or Wilsonian), he claims, lead to the unleashing of savagery. Bell makes several comparisons with the current Iraq war, and I think that the terrible simplifications of the pro-war party in America have frightened him, as it has many of us.

Bell rightly claims that his is a new argument. But is it an adequate argument? The breakdown of restraint, it seems to me, derives at least as much from a factor that Bell acknowledges, but curiously does not follow up – the cumulative logic of violence and Bonaparte’s ambition. Bell admits that for all his maniacal dedication to glory in warfare Bonaparte alone cannot be blamed for the total war of 1796-1815. He is not Hitler. But what Bell does allude to -- the logic of total war, (pp. 232, 249, 267) – merits a more formal analysis. Violence has a momentum of its own even when it proceeds one step at a time: Had one asked British and American war planners in 1940 whether they would ever deliberately try to incinerate whole city populations, they would have become indignant. But by 1943-45, this is precisely what they aimed at. The momentum toward totalizing warfare derived from the inability to provide security at any point short of unconditional subjugation or mutual exhaustion. More troops could always be raised before 1814-15 (a factor Bell usefully cites). How many wars never stop in time, that is at what game theorists term potential “saddle points,” or minimax equilibria. The Peloponnesian War, the Thirty Years War, World War I might have concluded early on with compromise treaties, but status quo ante conditions seemed unacceptable once the military effort expended had to be justified at home. In the French wars, it was not that such settlements were not attempted, but they always left too much in French hands to remain stable. Britain was unwilling to accept the French acquisitions, except briefly, and under a weak ministry. Austria took up arms five times (1792, 1800, 1805, 1808, 1813) as its position in Central Europe was repeatedly whittled away. Only Russia was large and powerful enough to have co-existed with a France hegemonic in the West, but Napoleon was unable to live with this continental bipolarity. Total war did not emerge from the dream of peace. It emerged from dreams of total triumph – ideological and strategic.

Bell proposes several subsidiary arguments – all stimulating, also problematic, but worthy of further exploration. He maintains that the Napoleonic period initiated a profound separation of military and civilian spheres of life. The professional soldiers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century were courtiers in France or landlords in Prussia; but they increasingly become a caste apart after the French wars. This may be true; but the same tendency toward caste and specialization became a characteristic of the professions in general. And if the garrison soldier became a new and disturbing phenomenon, it was accompanied by the effort to inculcate some military training among all males. Bell also cites the literature of the wars of German “liberation” in 1813-14 as a major source for the glorification of death and war in the decades to come. But the literature of glorious death is a very complex phenomenon

that cannot be separated from the Romantic movement in general and the increased separation of French revolutionary and nineteenth century gender roles and imagery.<sup>4</sup>

These are all issues for debate. Meanwhile for students and scholars who think that only twentieth century warfare so totally transformed the world, David Bell's bold book will offer a fundamental vision of how central war was to the revolutionary transformation of Europe, and how easy it is for society's to slip into mentalities of total war and extermination. Ultimately his work arises from the painful lessons of the present – that war hasn't gone away, and that for its victims, all war remains total.

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<sup>4</sup> Karen Hagemann, *Männlicher Muth und Teutsche Ehre: Nation, Militär und Geschlecht zur Zeit der antinapoleonischen Krieg Preussens* (Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 2002).

Author's Response by **David A. Bell**, Johns Hopkins University

**T**o begin with, my thanks to the editors of H-Diplo for having chosen my book as the subject of this Forum, and to Charles Maier and Charles Esdaile for their careful and stimulating critiques. While I disagree strongly with some of their conclusions (especially Esdaile's), I am grateful to them for the kind remarks they have made, and also for their willingness to engage seriously with my book.

I chose a deliberately provocative title for the book, and it has duly provoked both my reviewers. It may therefore be helpful to start here by restating what I mean by "total war." As I stressed in my introduction (esp. pp. 7-9), the term is a slippery one. In popular usage, it usually signifies a war that involves the complete mobilization of a society's resources to achieve the absolute destruction of an enemy, with all distinction erased between combatants and noncombatants. But in practice, no war can live up to this ideal, and attempts to define an arbitrary threshold of mobilization or destruction beyond which war becomes "total" strike me as largely unprofitable. If the term is to have any real use, it seems to me that it has to rest on a clear distinction between "total" wars and other sorts.

Following Jean-Yves Guiomar and Michael Geyer,<sup>5</sup> I argue that this distinction properly involves politics and culture as much as it does military matters alone. In modern times, calls for absolute mobilization and absolute destruction have come predominantly from civilian political figures, not military ones—notoriously, Joseph Goebbels, in his Sportpalast speech of 1943. It is the politicians who, often with a relatively poor understanding or experience of war, have pushed for ever greater degrees of commitment and violence, and insisted on pushing war to the bitter end. As Geyer has brilliantly shown, this was even (indeed, especially) true of Germany at the end of World War I, despite the subsequent "Dolchstoß" legend of cowardly civilian politicians betraying a resolute military by surrendering. I suggested in my book that total war is characterized less by a particular level of violence, whether involving "producers" or "recipients" (to use Maier's terms) than by a process of political radicalization that pushes the combatants unstopably towards increasing levels of violence until one side or the other simply collapses. It is a definition which, at least at the level of large territorial states, only truly fits the modern period, because only in this period did it become possible even to envisage or attempt the militarization of entire societies of millions of people spread across broad areas (the very concept of "society" in this modern meaning only emerged at the end of the seventeenth century).

But what drives the process of radicalization? Ultimately, I think, it rests on two factors. First, there must be a perception that the stakes of the war are simply too immense to allow

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<sup>5</sup> Jean-Yves Guiomar, *L'invention de la guerre totale, XVIIIe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Le Félin, 2004); Michael Geyer, "People's War: The German Debate about a *Levée en Masse* in October, 1918," in Daniel Moran and Arthur Waldron (eds.), *The People in Arms: Military Myth and National Mobilization since the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 124-58.

it to be stopped, perhaps even at the cost of one's own destruction. Nazi Germany offers an extreme example of a case where, at the end, the leadership almost seemed not to be fighting for the nation's survival, but positively embraced the nation's annihilation. And second, the adversary must be seen as fundamentally different from oneself—as criminal, or monstrous, or an “enemy of the human race.” Let me add that I don't think these factors need to be fully present at every moment of the conflict, but rather at those crucial moments that push the adversaries towards greater violence. Nor do they need to characterize the views of every sector of the population, or even every sector of the armed forces. As Charles Esdaile quite rightly observes, British and French soldiers in the Peninsula often felt considerable sympathy towards each other (as soldiers in the trenches did at certain moments of World War I). What matters here is the political leadership that decides the ultimate course of the wars.

It is precisely these two factors that distinguish the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars from the wars of the *ancien régime* and collectively earn them, in my view, the title of “the first total war. To be sure, the factors were hardly present in full and equal measure throughout all the years from 1792 to 1815. Napoleon Bonaparte repeatedly, and indeed somewhat tragically, strove to be accepted by Europe's rulers as a brother monarch and founder of a legitimate dynasty. And at times he seemed close to succeeding, notably at Tilsit, and at the moment of his wedding to Marie-Louise. The point, however, is that ultimately these attempts, and many others, failed. The sides could not recognize each other as honorable adversaries, and in the end the allies embraced the cause of total victory and treated Napoleon as a criminal, not a legitimate head of state. In the final analysis, the survival of regimes was at stake. As I argue in the book, it is precisely this inability to accept the idea of a permanent settlement with the adversary that drove the uneven but ultimately unstoppable intensification of warfare throughout the period, whether measured by the number of battles fought, the number of combatants present, the number of dead and wounded, or the destruction wrought on civilian society (see especially my discussion on page 7). It is what led these wars to cause significant changes in the territory and/or political system of every single European state—something without precedent in European history.

It is on these points that I would principally challenge my reviewers. Charles Maier finds my definition of total war to be “vague” (readers will have to decide for themselves whether it is vague, or simply complex), and argues instead for a definition in terms of the recipients of violence. To my mind, this is not really sufficient. It can be said, as Maier does, that “for its victims, all war remains total,” but in this case all wars are total from some perspectives, and the phrase “total war” loses its utility entirely. I stand by the definition I've provided in my book, and in this response.

Maier also criticizes me on the grounds that I do not pay sufficient attention to the cumulative effect of violence, and the ambition of Bonaparte. Again, it seems to me that focusing on these factors, important as they are, does not allow one to distinguish easily between different sorts of war, since very many wars indeed involve both cumulative violence, and raging ambitions. I would ask Maier why the wars of Louis XIV, which involved a great deal of cumulative violence, and a French ruler second in ambition only to

Bonaparte, did not generate anywhere near the level of violence found in the wars of 1792-1815, destructive as they too proved for Europe. The essential reason, in my view, is that political leaders in this earlier period did not see the struggle as an apocalyptic one upon which the fate of their civilization depended, and did not view their enemies as monstrous enemies of the human race. To the contrary, they recognized these enemies as honorable adversaries, and understood that remaining true to their own standards of honor demanded that certain limits be observed. To be sure, in practice the limits were frequently, and brutally crossed—notoriously, in the Palatinate. Nonetheless, the idea of limits had real force, and the transgressions mostly remained on a much smaller scale than the violence of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. In the end, the powers managed to come to a comprehensive peace settlement without “regime change.”

In keeping with these arguments, my strategy in *The First Total War* was to seek the origins of the very different conflicts of the Revolutionary era by examining how the culture of war had changed by the late eighteenth century. Above all, I was concerned to compare the fundamentally aristocratic culture of limited war which prevailed at the time of Louis XIV, to the later, post-Enlightenment culture of war in which limits proved far more difficult to impose. Professor Maier is correct that I point particularly to the renewed dream of doing away with war entirely that came to grip the imagination of Enlightenment readers, and the paradoxical consequence that this dream in fact drove the combatants to total war. However, I stress this factor as part of a more general argument about the broad cultural shifts that took place. And I deliberately try to distinguish these cultural shifts from ideological ones. What is astonishing about the period 1792-1815 is that the wars continued to expand in scope and intensity despite their rapidly changing ideological stakes. I agree with Maier that Napoleon had a vision of strategic “total triumph”—which may not have been so far removed from dreams of perpetual peace. But I disagree that Napoleon had any real program of *ideological* total triumph, as Maier argues. After the proclamation of the Empire he wished rather to be accepted as a fellow monarchist and dynast by the other European powers, and pursued largely pragmatic policies in service of this goal. It was his tragedy that *despite* this explicit desire for a large degree of ideological convergence, the logic of war made it impossible for him to achieve it.

In response to Charles Maier, I would also like to emphasize that the cultural shift I attempted to track was of course an uneven one, and that I do not mean to put it forth as the sole explanatory factor behind the intensification of warfare, but simply as one, crucial, powerful factor. Thus I agree that Wellington is a figure who bridges the two eras—although I would consider him in many ways a representative soldier of *ancien régime* Europe. I agree that the professionalization of the army reflected, in part, a growing trend towards professionalization throughout European society, and that the literature of glorious death cannot be separated from the Romantic movement in general, and questions of gender. I did not mean to claim otherwise, but still believe that it is possible to situate these issues, as I did, in the context of the changing culture of war.

Charles Esdaile offers a somewhat harsher evaluation of my book. In what I cannot help but think of as a quintessentially British style of academic critique, he starts with praise, but soon moves to find “many cracks” and a “hole” in my argument, and concludes his

review with the blanket statement that the book “does not convince.” If I might return the compliment, the fact is that the sturdiest of arguments will soon sport some cracks and holes if pounded upon with chisels of misinterpretation. Esdaile is a leading expert in the Napoleonic Wars, and I benefitted greatly from his work in writing my own. But when it comes to cultural history, his understanding is less sure, as he unfortunately demonstrates in his review.

The biggest “hole” Esdaile claims to have found concerns precisely my claim for the emergence of a new culture of war at the end of the eighteenth century. To invalidate it, Esdaile points to the conflicts that took place in eastern and northern Europe beginning in 1787. “Given that the same thinking was around in 1787 as 1792,” Esdaile asks, “why did this struggle not degenerate into a total war *à la Bell*?” I have to say that given the overall structure of my argument, I would have had to be quite dim for this question not to occur to me. But of course I *did* pose the question, very clearly, at the end of the second chapter of my book (pp. 82-83), and answered it as follows:

Before 1789, however, all these various currents of thought remained abstractions, with little relationship to the actual conduct of European politics and war [...] The arguments for peace had become conventional wisdom for a large section of Europe’s intellectual elites, but they had yet to gain much purchase on Europe’s ruling elites, to say nothing of its military elites. In these circles, the aristocratic code still flourished [...] For the separations to be overcome — for the glass walls dividing philosophy from war to shatter — would require nothing less than the collapse of the aristocratic system that maintained them. It would require cool, abstract questions of state building to turn hot and palpable with urgency. Which is to say, it would require a revolution.

If Charles Esdaile did in fact read and take note of this passage, I wish he would have done me the courtesy of acknowledging it. Moreover, I do not think it a particularly daring or controversial argument. After all, the fact that various ideas had come to be accepted by “enlightened” European opinion hardly meant that the political leadership of all European states accepted them, or that it did not take the extraordinary rupture of the French Revolution to bring them to the fore. The changes I am positing were not, despite what Esdaile seems to think, epistemic shifts *à la Michel Foucault*.

In fact, Esdaile might pose his question more profitably to himself. He agrees with me that the scale of the Napoleonic wars was truly “unprecedented,” and represented a dramatic departure from the northern and eastern wars of 1787. Yet he still asks why, in the book, I emphasize political culture over such factors as developments in the art of war, technology, agriculture, growth in population, commerce, and wealth, the emergence of the modern state, and revolutionary ideology. But had not the principal changes in all but the last of these factors already occurred by 1787? Then why the dramatic break that Esdaile himself admits took place during the Revolution? The only remaining factor he raises is revolutionary ideology, so for Esdaile, it would then seem that ideology must bear the principle responsibility for the conflict’s radicalization. But as I argued above, and in the book, we are then left with the conundrum of why the radicalization of warfare continued apace even as the Napoleonic regime explicitly *retreated* from revolutionary ideology.

Esdaile, like Maier, also questions the extent to which the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars really constituted a “total war.” He points to the relatively small scale of the battles of the 1790’s, the fact that the major powers remained ready to settle for a compromise peace until very late in the game, and that they “for the most part continued to wage war in the same style as they had in the years before the Revolution.” I tried to address these points above, pointing out that my book does *not* define total war as a complete mobilization of the contending powers throughout the conflict, but as a process of radicalization that drives the powers *towards* such a state of affairs. By not engaging with the way I actually defined my subject, Esdaile ends up arguing against a straw man. I might add that while the major powers did often attempt to remain true to traditional ways of fighting, the huge changes in scale nonetheless meant that they were *not* fighting in this fashion, much as they might have wanted to. In the case of Britain, I argue in the book (see esp. p. 254) that the changing conceptions of warfare showed through not only in its vastly increased levels of manpower, but especially in its willingness to impose total mobilization on its client state of Portugal, where a greater proportion of the population served in the armed forces than in any other European state.

Finally, there is the question of campaigns of insurgency and counter-insurgency. Now, Charles Esdaile is undoubtedly one of our leading experts on this subject, particularly the war in Spain, and has done an enormous amount to debunk the myths that long circulated about it. No one can still believe that the Spanish war consisted of the very streams, valleys, and hills taking up arms to defend themselves, as the novelist Benito Pérez Galdós put it in the late nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Esdaile seems to think that I am still attached to such myths. But in the chapter of my book which deals with insurgencies, I in fact follow his own conclusions, and make quite clear the limited role played by civilians, even in Spain. I also agree with Esdaile about civilians doing very little fighting in Prussia and Russia—which does not mean, however, that the Prussian attempt to mobilize the adult male population in 1813 was not dramatic and unprecedented (I am puzzled why Esdaile, at one point in his review, concedes that Prussia waged “total war” against France, but later plays down the same episode as involving traditional representatives of the armed forces of the state). Esdaile finally asks why I am not as skeptical about atrocity stories in Spain as I am about some of those in the Vendée. In fact, on page 290 I remark that “the hundreds of accounts that survive from both sides are generally impossible to confirm and often contradict one another.” But Esdaile seems not to have noticed that in talking about atrocities, the ones I pay particular attention to are those committed by the French, and attested to in *French* sources, such as the memoirs of Thiébault, Hugo, and Rocca, or the correspondence of French general Honoré-Charles Reille. Here, we obviously have better reason to take the witnesses at their word.

In any case, it is one thing to debunk old myths about *la guerrilla*, and another to downplay the novelty and significance of the Spanish war as a whole. To be sure, as Esdaile has amply demonstrated, much of the population showed apathy during much of the war. But the Spanish rebels nonetheless made repeated efforts to wage total war against the French,

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<sup>6</sup> Benito Pérez Galdós, *Juan Martín, el Empecinado*, trans. and ed. Alva V. Cellini (Lewiston, N.Y. : Edwin Mellen Press, 2003).

and the irregular warfare that actually took place proved sufficient to tie down hundreds of thousands of French troops in Spain (400,000 in 1810), and to drive them to extreme measures on many occasions. Esdaile tries, in his review, to place the Spanish war back into an *ancien régime* framework. But did the *ancien régime*, with its elaborate conventions of siege warfare, have any equivalent to the sieges of Saragossa, which saw some of the worst urban combat in Europe before the twentieth century, and in which upwards of 50,000 people may have lost their lives? This was *not* warfare of the *ancien régime* variety. My overall point is that one can accept Esdaile's particular conclusions as to the course of the war, and still fit it into an overall story about the development of "total war." To do this, however, one has to accept the way I have defined "total war." Had Esdaile at least acknowledged this definition, some of the confusions in his review might have been avoided.

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**David A. Bell**, a historian, is Dean of Faculty, and Andrew W. Mellon Professor of the Humanities at Johns Hopkins University. A specialist in the history of early modern and modern France, he has written three books: *Lawyers and Citizens: The Making of a Political Elite in Old Regime France* (Oxford University Press, 1994); *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Harvard University Press, 2001); and *The First Total War*. The first of these won the Pinkney Prize of the Society for French Historical Studies as the best book of the year in French history, and the second won the Gershoy Prize of the American Historical Association as the best book of the year in early modern European history. He has held fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. His scholarly articles have appeared in the *Annales, Past and Present*, the *American Historical Review*, and the *Journal of Modern History*. A frequent contributor to general interest magazines, he is a Contributing Editor of *The New Republic*.

A further response from **Charles S. Maier**, Harvard University

I appreciate David Bell's reflection on my critique of his book and would make only two points in response. I still believe that we shall understand the duration and escalation of wars more by the inability to settle on obvious equilibria or saddle points for settlement than because of unsustainable reveries of peace. And while I agree that warfare has played a recurring role in human history, I don't think it is merely utopian to believe that someday major war might possibly go the way of slavery.

I have, secondly, continued to ponder the idea of total war since reading Bell's stimulating work, but find myself persistently dissatisfied with the term, even when, as he suggests, it serves as an asymptotic concept never totally realized in practice. Despite David Bell's robust defense, I believe that it raises disabling dilemmas. A war can be total for one side

in a conflict (as in a protracted anticolonial struggle) and only partially distracting for the other. The intensity of involvement remains hard to specify: Did the inhabitants of Central Europe or even their state structures experience less total a conflict during the years 1618-48 than those of 1792-1815? I fear that historians, as well as such ideologues as Goebbels, most famously, invoke the term more for its symphonic crescendos than for analytic clarity. But, of course, let us continue to debate the utility of the term for historical understanding and reconstruction. Along the way we can advance scholarly precision and, as Bell rightly demonstrates, relearn how compelling a historical impact warfare has periodically exerted.

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