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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, 2007. x + 420 pp. $15.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-618-91981-9.

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The concept of "total war" is not a new one to historians, particularly those of the twentieth century. For many, the First and Second World Wars represented a new level or experience of war for those in the combatant states. The term "total war" implied or sought to describe "the complete mobilization of a society's resources to achieve the absolute destruction of an enemy, with all distinction erased between combatants and noncombatants" (p. 7). For all of its superficial clarity, the term total war remains problematic, and David Bell--a leading authority on Old Regime and revolutionary France--prefers only to apply it to war "in a broad political and cultural context" (p. 8). In a thought-provoking way that is likely to be controversial, he seeks to apply it in this instance to what historians have traditionally thought of as the French Revolutionary (1792-1802) and Napoleonic Wars (1802-15).

To denominate these conflicts as "total war" is not in fact new, but Bell--in accordance with his own very specific definition--thinks it applicable because "[w]hat marked the conflicts that began in 1792 was not simply their radically new scope and intensity but also the political dynamic that drove the participants relentlessly toward a condition of total engagement and the abandonment of restraints" (p. 8). Even before France declared war on the Austrian Habsburg Emperor in 1792, most French political leaders had attained a new understanding of war, as something extraordinary and apocalyptic, which must end either in total victory or in total defeat. This mood enabled French leaders to go to war without a clear strategy, to demonize their Austrian Habsburg foes as intent on the annihilation of their enemy (France and its revolution) and on this basis to refuse to regard the Austrians as in any way deserving of the traditional consideration between enemies. The conquering French forces' extreme treatment of their opponents stimulated the latter to adopt an equally cataclysmic view of the French and of the horrors of war: the inevitable consequences were recorded by, among others, the Spanish artist Goya in his unforgettable etchings depicting some of the atrocities committed by both sides in the so-called Peninsular War.

Historians have long recognized the radicalization of attitudes in and to war in and after the 1790s. Where, Bell very self-consciously differs from others is in his explanation. According to Bell, the adoption of the apocalyptic attitude just mentioned is usually accounted for by reference to two key developments. First was the ideological conflict between the French revolutionaries--who between 1789 and 1792 transformed French state and society--and their Old Regime opponents. The mental or ideological gulf between these two worlds was such that co-existence and mutual respect were out of the question. Second, says Bell, was nascent nationalism.

Bell is not so sure. He prefers to identify a transformation in the "culture of war" between the middle of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth, more or less coterminous with the life of Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), whose career provides in some sense a focus for the book. This cultural transformation had various component strands. Firstly, the military sphere became increasingly separated from the civilian sphere. This transformation in turn gave rise to militarism; that is, the imposition of the values of the military sphere on the civilian one, a development encapsulated in the first military coup of modern times, Napoleon's seizure of power in France in 1799. These developments, finally, related to a bigger shift, in what--echoing the Annales historians--we might call a transformation of *mentalité*. Before the Enlightenment, argues Bell, Old Regime France (like Europe generally) was "at ease" with war. War was thought of as a normal state of affairs, waged by professionals, generally aristocratic officers (including the womanizing Duke of Lauzun, a figure who provides a useful thread on which to hang some of Bell's themes) for whom army service was just another phase in a very varied career. The transformation of the "culture of war" began, according to Bell, with the Enlightenment. For many of the philosophes, war was a barbaric interlude, an extraordinary aberration in the general story of progress that was the essence of history. But the French Revolution allowed the view that war was unusual to become more widely held and more deeply entrenched; thus, it made possible the horrors of succeeding decades, during which all the combatants saw themselves fighting the last war, the war to end war.

In some respects, Bell's arguments are not entirely novel. Tim Blanning's 1986 study of the background to the French Revolutionary Wars not only noted that the revolutionaries waged "total war"--and that Napoleon tightened the screw (if that was possible)--but also found the origin of those conflicts to lie in a fundamental, ideological mistrust and misunderstanding between the two sides which is, surely, what Bell is arguing here. Nevertheless, Bell's claim to be opening up the cultural history of war in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras retains some credibility. For all the work on battles and campaigns, on generals and so on, this "cultural" aspect remains relatively under-explored. Bell seeks to explain this neglect in part, at least, by considering how history and the historical profession have developed over the last century or more. Whereas the empirical historians, Leopold von Ranke, Thomas Babington Macaulay, and Jules Michelet, included war in their "grand narrative," twentieth-century schools of history--not least those inclined to follow the so-called "linguistic turn" and the postmodernists--have generally not prioritized research on war or its history.

Bell has an additional purpose, which is reflected in the structure and style of his book. Besides offering a very readable account of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars--the text is not cluttered with footnotes, since all references are gathered by page number at the end of the book--Bell is clearly writing for a contemporary North American audience, one wrestling with the implications of the continuing intervention in Iraq. At times, Bell makes this connection quite explicit. Thus the supposed absurdity of Napoleon's expe-

dition to Egypt (1798) is compared with "the most recent Western invasion of a large Middle Eastern country, under equally improbable pretexts" (p. 212) and the difficulties of the French in Spain after 1808 are compared with the situation of the U.S. forces in Iraq following their initial victory there (in 2003). Bell closes with a series of thoughts in which he urges that--having immersed ourselves in an apocalyptic notion of war (against Islamic terror) reminiscent of the attitudes prevalent in Europe between 1792 and 1815--we need to recognize our "romantic" delusion and return instead to an eighteenth-century vision of war as something more ordinary and normal, one in consequence of which we will not demonize the enemy but treat the latter (more) humanely.

Not all will agree with Bell's history or his use of it, but what is very striking here (and heartening?) is the way that an academic historian--one whose scholarship (on eighteenth-century France) is highly regarded--is seeking to engage with the public on serious issues, in effect to make history relevant to burning contemporary issues that matter to the public, and to do "public history." Bell may not be Edward Gibbon, Macaulay, or Michelet, but perhaps something is to be said for the historian as public figure, steering discussion of key concerns outside the academy.

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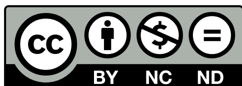
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