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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. Pp. x, 420. ISBN 978-0-618-34965-4.

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David Bell, an accomplished historian of early modern France, makes the point of his latest book clear in its first paragraphs: the hopes of 1989–90 that the Cold War, and perhaps all war, had at last come to an end recalled the great hopes on the eve of the French Revolution, 1789–90, that the age of war was at last over, because a polity of Reason had come to power. These hopes were of course cruelly disappointed in each case by the outbreak of a period of savage warfare.

Like a symphony whose initial theme quickly disappears only to emerge later for further development, this opening argument, more psychological than historical, to the effect that the deep disappointment and frustration of those who had hoped for an age of peace would subsequently fuel an age of terrific violence, soon gives way to a second theme, the argument of the book's title, that the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon, 1792–1815, were "the first total war." Bell's comparison of the '89–'90s, two centuries apart, is as original as it is dubious. His second and main theme, that the wars of 1792–1815 were the prototype of future total wars, is convincingly developed but unoriginal. He cites Jean-Yves Guimar's *L'Invention de la guerre totale*,<sup>1</sup> published in 2004, but his primary argument that the years from the battle of Valmy (1792) to the battle of Waterloo (1815) saw the origin of what may reasonably be called total war was adumbrated already in 1812 by Carl von Clausewitz, who asserted that nothing in war would ever be as it had been, as well as a number of later writers.<sup>2</sup> Bell gives credit to Guimar, and he quotes Clausewitz, though not as fully as he might have. His originality lies only in giving this old theme its fullest development, using a wealth of modern scholarship and a narrative so energetic that it threatens to overwhelm the larger thematic argument.

By "total war" Bell means what is generally understood by this flexible term: war without limits, in which every available resource, human and material, is mobilized, legal and moral restrictions are brushed aside, and military effort and political direction become fused by a superheated emotional climate to a degree that makes any rational definition of purpose and objective virtually impossible. Bell makes his case in several ways, each constituting a subordinate theme.

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<sup>1</sup> Paris: Éditions du Félin, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Jean L.A. Colin, *Les Transformations de la guerre* [1911], Eng. ed., *Transformations of War*, tr. L.H. R. Pope-Hennessy (1977; rpt. Cranbury, NJ: Scholars Bookshelf, 2006); Guglielmo Ferrero, *Peace and War*, tr. B. Pritchard (London: Macmillan, 1933); Hoffman Nickerson, *The Armed Horde, 1793–1939* (NY: Putnam, 1940; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1942); J.F.C. Fuller, *The Conduct of War, 1789–1961* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers U Pr, 1961; rpt. NY: Da Capo, 1992).

The first two chapters deal with the epoch before the French Revolution—the Ancien Régime. Here we learn that warfare in the Old Regime was an expression of aristocratic culture and therefore a fairly ridiculous business, essentially a sport for the nobility, who led the armies of Europe in a kind of military minuet or chess game, each side maneuvering to achieve minor advantage while avoiding battles, which were indeed rare but often very bloody, further encouraging avoidance. The evident restraint with which the great powers fought one another, and in so doing observed the rules that protected civilians and prisoners of war from war's violence, reflected the strictly limited aims of warfare itself. Bell builds on this picture of contemporary limited war to expose at some length the hopes of Enlightened Europe, articulated by men of Reason from Fénelon to Kant, that under a rational New Regime this absurd spectacle would simply disappear. The weakness of these chapters is that on both themes he has exaggerated greatly.

Bell's account simply ignores other determinants of limited warfare in the Old Regime—the balance of European power, the tremendous financial burden of maintaining armed forces and replacing their losses, operational methods imposed by primitive infantry weapons and highly developed systems of fortification, and situationally defined limits on strategic objectives. In doing so, Bell has rehearsed an old, flimsy stereotype of Old Regime warfare—effete generals leading brave but incompetent officers who command peasant-soldiers too brutalized to run away in battle. Quoting Clausewitz on this subject is to succumb to the Prussian's rhetorical device as he set off to join the Russians in 1812. Like Machiavelli ridiculing the warfare of the condottieri, Clausewitz knew perfectly well, and wrote accordingly, that warfare before 1789 was not some kind of great international joke, but a serious business.

On the hopes of the Enlightenment to end all war, Bell is again guilty of exaggeration. A few men of Reason interested themselves in war, but not many, and the argument that their reasoning on war influenced a whole generation of Europeans is as mistaken as Bell's characterization of warfare itself in the Old Regime. On the weakness of this part of his argument rests the dubious comparison of 1989–90 with the situation exactly two centuries earlier. What may be more interesting is the possible inference, perhaps unintended by the author, that the laws of war, designed to limit the violence visited upon non-combatants, were a byproduct of aristocratic culture, and could not survive the fury of democratized warfare.

In the following six chapters, the main part of the book, dealing directly with war from 1792 to 1815, Bell gives great emphasis to just those aspects of warfare that involved armed civilian resistance to the imposition of rule by the French Republic and Empire. From the war of the Vendée, when the peasants of western France followed their priests in resisting the Revolution (1792–94), to the comparable but far more extensive resistance of priest-led Spanish peasants to French occupation (1808–13), and to the many lesser insurrections against French rule from Belgium to the Tyrol and on to Calabria, Bell stresses what may be called the Goyaesque horrors of the “guerrilla”—ambush, atrocity, unsparing retaliation, and extermination. He invokes Vietnam in this account, and is explicit in his message for an American audience today: “To grasp the essence of the conflict, we need look little further than the uncannily similar situation that unfolded in Iraq after the American victory in 2003” (284). But Bell has again gone over the top, as if this kind of war were the only

kind that mattered. In fact, except for Spain, these nasty conflicts were sooner or later suppressed, and not even Spain deflected the course of Imperial strategy. The Empire functioned despite local resistance; it extracted resources from occupied territories and kept most of them relatively acquiescent. In the end, the Empire was strong enough to invade Russia in 1812, and after a horrendous defeat to regain quickly a formidable presence. It went down fighting, and from a Napoleonic perspective these awful guerrilla wars were no more than a nuisance. Bell has managed to bend the picture of the French wars into a shape that Napoleon would not have recognized.

Every generation writes history in terms of its own concerns, but by imposing the concerns of twenty-first-century America on a bravura portrait of an earlier, remarkable time, he has reduced his brilliant historical essay to a mere polemic.