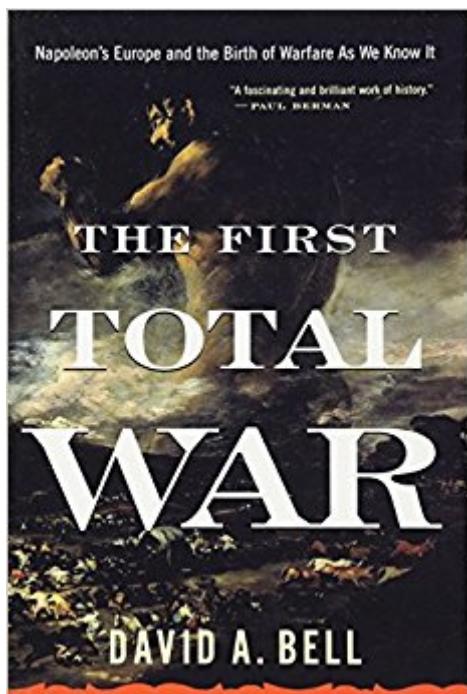


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# The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe And The Birth Of Warfare As We Know It



## Synopsis

The twentieth century is usually seen as "the century of total war." But as the historian David Bell argues in this landmark work, the phenomenon actually began much earlier, in the era of muskets, cannons, and sailing ships—*in the age of Napoleon*. In a sweeping, evocative narrative, Bell takes us from campaigns of "extermination" in the blood-soaked fields of western France to savage street fighting in ruined Spanish cities to central European battlefields where tens of thousands died in a single day. Between 1792 and 1815, Europe plunged into an abyss of destruction. It was during this time, Bell argues, that our modern attitudes toward war were born. In the eighteenth century, educated Europeans thought war was disappearing from the civilized world. So when large-scale conflict broke out during the French Revolution, they could not resist treating it as "the last war" -- a final, terrible spasm of redemptive violence that would usher in a reign of perpetual peace. As this brilliant interpretive history shows, a war for such stakes could only be apocalyptic, fought without restraint or mercy. Ever since, the dream of perpetual peace and the nightmare of total war have been bound tightly together in the Western world—right down to the present day, in which the hopes for an "end to history" after the cold war quickly gave way to renewed fears of full-scale slaughter. With a historian's keen insight and a journalist's flair for detail, Bell exposes the surprising parallels between Napoleon's day and our own—including the way that ambition "wars of liberation," such as the one in Iraq, can degenerate into a gruesome guerrilla conflict. The result is a book that is as timely and important as it is unforgettable.

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## Customer Reviews

Bell combines his roles as professor of history at Johns Hopkins and contributing editor for the *New Republic* in this interpretive study arguing that history's first total war was waged during the Napoleonic era. Scholars have increasingly stressed the global aspects of the network of conflicts extending across North America, South Asia and Europe during that time. Bell goes further, presenting a fundamental transformation of war from an ordinary aspect of human existence to an apocalyptic experience whose "terrible sublimity" tested societies and individuals to their limits and ultimately became a redemptive experience. Total war developed not in the context of nationalism or revolutionary zeal, but in the fundamental sense of a "culture of war" driving participants in the direction of complete engagement and total abandonment of restraint. Ironically, the intellectual roots of this modern militarism are in the Enlightenment belief in the coming of perpetual peace. Revolutionary France transformed a moral concept into a practical one: war to emancipate humanity from its past. Bell's conclusion that this mentality survived two world wars is open to challenge, yet his appeal for the rediscovery of restraint and limitation is particularly relevant at a time of nuclear proliferation and apocalyptic rhetoric. (Jan. 12) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

The wars of the French Revolution acquired a pitiless character and an unprecedented scale for which historians have groped for explanations: ideology and French nationalism are most commonly cited. Bell elaborates an alternate viewpoint without dismissing traditional analyses. The author of two books on the *ancien régime*, Bell roots his thesis in Enlightenment theorizers of progress and, less philosophically, in the eighteenth-century aristocratic attitude toward war. Bell effectively personifies his case in a nobleman favorable to the Revolution but ultimately consumed by it, titled the Duke of Lauzun. The boudoir and the battlefield were all the same to him, stages for stylized and restrained performances of honor. When Lauzun was sent to western France to quell royalist revolt in 1793-94, his scruples doomed him as radicals demanded the annihilation of rebels. In this shocking civil war of the Vendee, Bell observes the seeds of the "total war" methods that grew apace in ensuing wars and established dark precedents for the future. Astute and fluid, Bell's study has ramifications beyond his historical specificity. Gilbert TaylorCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

David Bell provides an interesting thesis through an intellectual look at the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars and their effect on European culture and thinking. The rise of militarism and the move towards modernity in the army is categorized well throughout and supported by looking at

actions from Vendee, Italy, Egypt, Prussia and Spain. From brutalizing campaigns where the limited warfare of the old regime was cast aside in favor of not only large scale relentless battles but guerilla actions. The book is not simply a recasting of the great battles but combines the results of these battles with popular works of literature and theater at the time and the shifts in beliefs from the intellectuals down to the masses. Bell as always delivers a fresh look at a tired topic by utilizing the aspects of intellectual history and using them as a lens to view various events. In this case we see the development of a new type of warfare and how it crystallized in the Napoleonic era. The reason that I use the word interesting and disagree with various reviewers is that Bell thesis is not flawed but the fact that this warfare did not stick and went back to a traditional European model means it did not become dominant until later on. It planted the idea that this type of war could be waged and laid the groundwork for some of the great military minds to publish works such as *On War* creating new tactics and strategies to shape future wars. Overall well worth the time for those who enjoy military history or the exciting things that intellectual history can unlock when looking at a topic.

Enlightenment produced new currents of thoughts that repudiated the military culture of the old regime as merely pursuit of honor and glory. According to Bell, since the religious wars, modern European states and its concomitant aristocratic culture 'placed surprising limits on war' by mutually agreeing to a code of conduct to protect POWs, enemy noncombatants, etc. In a sense, the aristocratic wars were really 'large-scale duels with moral issues subordinated to the thirst for honor and glory' that treated enemy as 'honorable adversaries' and recoiled from inflicting needless human sufferings. Hence, Louis XIV's razing of the Palatinate particularly outraged and courted collective condemnation. Bell singled out Fenelon and his work, *Telemachus*, for corroding the adhesion to the aristocratic war culture. Its exhortation of the aged-old 'claims of conscience, denunciation of war and Christian pacifism' gained a huge following in France. D'Holbach's *The System of Nature*, another bestseller, proposed a theory of history to explain the persistence of warfare as an 'incomplete embrace of modernity - to remnants of barbarism.' War was just a stage in the progress to universal peace. In the minds of the reading public, these works 'transformed peace from a moral imperative to a historical one... and opened the door to the idea that in the name of future peace, any and all means might be justified - including even exterminatory war.' The cataclysmic social transformation of the French Revolution opened an opportunity for the execution and reinterpretation of those ideals. The Assembly debate on war and peace at the Manege underscored an acute shift from aristocratic concept of wars. Bell observed that new leaders such as Brissot 'saw international relations in idealistic terms straight out of *Telemachus*.' The Girondins

successfully made a declaration of peace but simultaneously asserted that 'peoples had the right to defend themselves vigorously if attacked.' War rhetoric took a fanatical turn: 'A coming 'worldwide war of liberation was a holy cause; we will only be "regenerated" by blood; we need strong explosions to expel strong poison in the body of France.' The Revolution spurred the conviction that war was 'a matter of morality and not science or aristocratic art,' no longer the 'chess piece maneuvers of the aristocrats.' The democratization of the hitherto aristocratic monopoly of glory and honor formed the plank of the modern culture of war. Individual soldiers and military leaders could enjoy upward mobility by battlefield achievements. The immediate consequence was the rise of 'political generals,' with Napoleon being its chief representative. The glorification of war successes underscored the military's moral superiority, the heart of militarism, which 'imposed the values and customs of the military on the civilian society.' For example, the Battle of Valmy gained legendary status that reverberated in the civilian society. The birth of a total war was complete when the French army with new leaders had to quell internal and external threats. The culture of war spawned a 'virtual cult of martyrdom.' The sensual treatment of young Joseph Bara's death and the Republic's reaction cultivated a demonization of the enemy and intensified the 'rhetoric of a war to the death.' War assumed a religious character and termed as a 'clash of proselytisms.' The spontaneous Vendee peasant uprisings was the apotheosis of this new war. The military viewed 'all Vendees as potentially soldiers and dedicated rebels' hence this 'erasure of the line between combatants and non combatants brought about the wanton slaughter of both.' Both sides adopted this total war unleashing unspoken cruelty. Evidence could be found from Calabria to Saragosa. This riveting and fascinating narrative charted the formation of a new war culture but the story falls short. In the introduction, Bell remarked on Americans' treatment of 'armed forces with respect verging on reverence' and the apocalyptic rhetoric used in the war of terror eerily mirrored the revolutionaries. How did this modern 'culture of war' metastasize and subsume into the fabric of western civilization and beyond? Bell's observations and evidence found in literature seem to support his theory but a further examination would greatly boost credibility.

The role of War in human events has been discussed by political philosophers for centuries. David Bell describes the early French traditions in his book; today, the argument continues: Authors like John Mueller claim that war is on the road to extinction (Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War), while others, "realists", think that it's very much here to stay (The Independence of Nations). In "The First Total War", Bell describes not only the conversation but its consequences - how the discourse of Peace and War affect the practice of warfare. And Bell offers a paradoxical

observation: that ideas about the obsolescence and even obscenity of war themselves cause war to be more terrible than otherwise. There are two ways of thinking of Bell's book: you can read it as a pretty straight history of The French Revolution and the Napoleonic Era, a little strange in its focus but that nonetheless covering most of the basics, or as an illustration of the main idea: That one of the great renovations of the French Revolution was instituting a view of War as abnormal and unnatural; And, ironically, that this de-legitimization of War made the Wars of the French Revolution into modern - total - wars, much worse than the wars that came before. Under the Ancient Regime, wars took place regularly. The European powers constantly fought one another. Every decade, at least one major European power fought another, and usually, more than one. The wars were perceived as a natural, inevitable part of international politics: Indeed, warfare had been the *raison d'être* of the state. War had been celebrated in Art, Literature and Poetry, and the great deeds of Kings and Generals universally acclaimed. But with the Enlightenment, a new brand of thinking came into being: the view of war as unnatural, an abomination. Philosophers like Voltaire and the Baron d'Holbach and popular writers like Archbishop Fenelon argued not only that war is evil, but that it is on the way out: That the growth of commerce, and the increased knowledge and sophistication of mankind means that war would cease. The French Revolution unleashed these ideas upon the world. The Revolutionaries, with faith in the rights of man, heralded a new age of perpetual peace. But first, the reactionary, counter revolutionary forces had to be destroyed... For the irony is that the very visions of perpetual Peace led with them the willingness to achieve it regardless of the means; Thus the wars of the ancient regime which were limited and under control were replaced by mass scale feasts of destruction. To put it in game theory terms (Which Bell doesn't do), the aristocrats who ran pre 1789 armies expected repeat engagements. They have had an incentive for moderation because they knew moderation would be returned. Cultural factors - such as the similarity between aristocratic leaders on all sides of the conflicts - helped enforce the moderation. After the Revolution, France's new leaders did not expect repeat engagements: they believed in total defeat for the enemy, followed by eternal peace. Partially as a result of this new outlook, wars became a grim, disastrous affair. In the war against France's foreign neighbors, an element of moderation remained because of fear of reprisals. But when destroying internal enemies, no such checks existed: the wide spread destruction of the Vendee region, the heart of the counter revolutionary forces in France, is shocking. "The Vendee was not a genocide, but it nonetheless stirs memories of recent genocidal horrors". (p.184). This theme sums up the first half of the book, and it might have ended here. Instead, Bell continues to chronicle the events of the Revolution, and the rise and fall of Napoleon Bonaparte. Here Bell's thesis is less clear, and the historical elements

of the narrative move to the stage's front. The argument Bell offers in this section is about the culture of the warrior not the horrors of warfare. Before the ancient regime, to be a soldier - to be a commander - was part of the persona one wore. No full time professionals, Ancient Regime aristocrats took soldiering as one of the many facets of their personality. They danced; They wrote poetry; They seduced ladies; And they made war. With the revolution, soldiering became professional. The army became separate from civilian life, housed separately in barracks and perceived as a different quality than the civil society. Indeed, only in the time of the French Revolution did the terms "Civilian" and "Military" come to detonate the different classes of people. Napoleon, as the first political general, knew how to use the difference between Civilian and Military spheres to his political advantage. If Civil society seemed corrupt, selfish and incompetent, Napoleon appeared an embodiment of the military spirit - brilliant, powerful, successful, loyal and patriotic. "What have you done with the France that I left you so brilliant?" he asked before taking power. "The Republic exists almost nowhere but in the armies" he claimed. His soldiers called upon him to take the mantle for the good of the country. "General, you have saved France... now save the Republic!" (pp. 218-222). Could he do anything but heed the call? The French Revolution doubtlessly changed Europe and the world in various respects. Bell's focuses on the transformation of warfare and of the military, of the birth of the professional soldier and the soldier cum political hero. And he offers an imperfect but lively history of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Era, including short summaries of the major battles. Both intellectually exciting and historically illuminating, it should appeal to the expert and the neophyte alike.

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