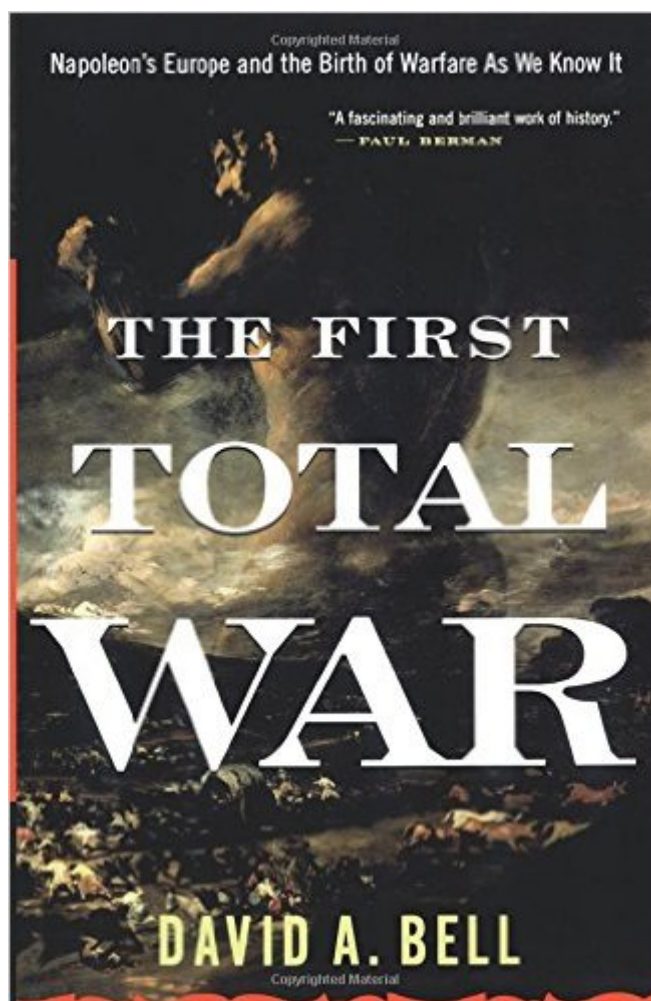


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# The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe And The Birth Of Warfare As We Know It



## 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 age of Napoleon. 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, and our modern attitudes toward war were born. Ever since, the dream of perpetual peace and the nightmare of total war have been bound tightly together in the Western world where wars of liberation such as the one in Iraq, can degenerate into gruesome guerrilla conflict. 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 in a book that is as timely and important as it is unforgettable.

## Book Information

Paperback: 432 pages

Publisher: Mariner Books; Reprint edition (January 16, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0618919813

ISBN-13: 978-0618919819

Product Dimensions: 5.6 x 1.1 x 8.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.5 out of 5 stars See all reviews (12 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #88,550 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #10 in Books > History > Military > Napoleonic Wars #103 in Books > History > Europe > France #144 in Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History > Military

## Customer Reviews

We have grown accustomed to viewing the World Wars of the 20th century as the first total wars in modern history, for they required the total mobilization and militarization of the societies involved. Their accompanying ideologies, fascism and communism, were appropriately called totalitarian since they left no aspect of society unaffected. Now historian David A Bell has written a new and different history of the Napoleonic Wars (1792 - 1815) arguing that they were in fact the first total wars. In his introduction, Bell tells us that he is borrowing techniques from intellectual history to write a military history. Traditionally military historians have restricted themselves to accounts of

battlefield tactics and weapon systems. Bell is attempting to go further in showing that the ideals of the Enlightenment played a role in what he calls the first total war. He believes that the French Revolution - the apotheosis of the Enlightenment - radicalized people's ideas about how and why wars should be fought. During the time of the ancien regime - which is Bell's main standard of comparison - wars were limited and short-lived. They were fought according to established rules and usually to defend the honor of this or that aristocrat; in fact, many times the armies were made up of mercenaries. The philosophes of the Enlightenment such as Kant, Diderot, d'Alembert, and the Marquis de Condorcet were certain that with the advent of reason wars would be a thing of the past. As late as 1790 Robespierre was declaring in the Assembly that the French nation had no desire to engage in war, that to invade another country and make it adopt their laws and constitution was the furthest thing from their minds. Much changed in two years. By 1792 there was growing opposition to the revolutionary government in Paris, especially in Vendee. The government decided to put down this rebellion with a degree of brutality not seen before. They conducted a scorched-earth policy that spared no one. They made no distinction between combattants and non-combattants. The dogs of war had been unleashed to save the revolution and to obliterate any dissent. Bell explores the nature of total war and how it feeds on itself. Once the military becomes front and center of the government, war becomes unstoppable. All of the nation's resources and efforts went to the Grand Armee to create an empire in places as far as Egypt and Russia. In his retelling of the Spanish campaign, Bell attempts to draw a parallel with America's intervention in Iraq. To an extent there are some parallels. Napoleon claimed to be bringing Enlightenment ideals and reform to Spain, yet the insurgency would have none of it. This, however, is a distraction from Bell's thesis; whatever else it is doing in Iraq, America is not conducting a total war. This is a very restrained and cautious use of military power. In fact, Napoleon's excursion into Spain was somewhat cautious to be called total war. When contrasted with what transpired in the preceding century and what the philosophes predicted, the Napoleonic Wars were barbaric and total, but it is still not clear how they were different from, say, the Mongol invasions of the Middle Ages or the military expeditions of Alexander the Great. It seems that the so-called total wars of Napoleon have been done before. The total mobilization of people and resources is as old as human history. Mutual and absolute hatred for the enemy is a timeless emotion. Bell's argument that hell hath no fury like a citizen's army is reminiscent of Victor Davis Hanson's thesis in *Carnage and Culture*, and it is as unconvincing. Bell's book provides much food for thought on how quickly circumstances can change from permanent peace to permanent war without pinpointing exactly what triggers the change. Paranoia, perceived threat, and survival are all factors in the devolution of high ideals to base

hostility. And why armies of citizens driven by Enlightenment ideals fight more effectively than previous armies is still unanswered. However, Bell makes a robust effort with this original work.

As a brief history of the late Enlightenment and the French Revolution: 4 stars  
As a brief history of the Napoleonic Wars (only 3 of 8 chapters): 3 stars  
As a coherent political theory: 2 stars  
On average, this amounts to 3 stars and makes for a light readable history accompanied by some often interesting theory. However, if you're getting the book based on its title, 2.5 stars might be more accurate. The history itself is fine, making for a broad overview with a few good insights, so my critique will focus on the theory and the parallels Bell draws. Bell is not an idiot and seems to have a good grasp of general history, capable of soberly pointing out that the total American casualties in the War on Terror have so far amounted to less than what the Russians would have suffered in an average 6 hours during WWII. Yet he will often come up with the most inane comments to keep the book contemporary. For instance, he repeatedly states how "uncannily similar" the guerrilla war in Spain is to the current Iraq insurgency. "Uncannily similar" in what sense? The answer seems to be that they're both insurgencies - just like Afghanistan, Somalia, Vietnam, Lebanon, and thousands of other historical insurgencies. Arguably Iraq has more in common with the Jewish revolt against the Romans than with the Peninsula War. But then, of course, if he argued that, he would be admitting that fanatical insurgency predates the French Revolution by a long margin. What he terms "Total War" is also problematic. The West has only fought a handful of total wars since Napoleonic times. Instead, less technologically advanced societies have tended to be the ones to most fully mobilize their populations in war. But is this really a modern phenomenon? Bell admits city states fought total wars in this [his] sense, but so too did tribal societies, nomadic pastoralists, and small colonies. Some of the religious wars of the 16th and 17th century seemed pretty total too. Perhaps he has things the wrong way around and it is "limited war" that needs explaining. On the other hand, he is right to emphasise the role the French Revolution played in the military/civilian split, the advent of the literate soldier, and the rise of propaganda. He also brings up the birth of the philosophical concept of a War to End All Wars (in the non-Biblical sense, of course). Did these things lead to Total War though? He is unconvincing. Wars had already long been fought as much to eliminate other powers as for plunder or to keep a system of powers in balance. "Delenda Carthago/Carthage must be destroyed" is not a modern call to war.

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.

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