

[*The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It*, David A. Bell, Houghton Mifflin, 432 pages]

## Ideology Arms Itself

By William Anthony Hay

DURING A BUDGET DEBATE in February 1792, William Pitt the Younger informed the House of Commons that never had there been a time “when, from the situation of Europe, we might more reasonably expect fifteen years of peace.”

Within a year, war with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France had dashed such expectations, though few predicted the onset of general war. Seasoned European observers assumed that France's domestic troubles rendered it harmless. Only Edmund Burke, the great contrarian of British politics in the 1780s, viewed the French Revolution as an armed doctrine waging war on social order and anticipated the consequences.

In *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It*, David Bell provocatively argues that total war—the unconstrained drive to secure complete victory by any means necessary—emerged from the French Revolution and the 23 years of fighting that followed. Revolutionary ideologies gave Napoleon Bonaparte the means to seize power, and his bid to dominate Europe transformed warfare. The unprecedented mobilization of populations and resources, combined with the abandonment of restraints, set a new model that demanded absolute victory—no room existed for compromise. By presenting an existential challenge to Napoleon's new order, insurgents drove authorities to abandon limits and adopt measures little short of extermination. Such campaigns forged a concept of war that continues to shape modern understandings of conflicts large and small.

Although it seems paradoxical for total war to follow an enlightened age that aspired to universal peace, Bell draws the connection between the extremes. The hope that one final conflict might transform society tantalized those who thought only artificial institutions, and the monsters who sustained them, prevented humanity from achieving its natural harmony. Revolutionaries thus embraced war for the sake of peace; to flinch from whatever violence might be necessary would be a betrayal of their noble aspirations. Georges Danton's chilling reference in 1791 to “the exterminating angel of liberty” expressed a sense of war as an expiation of sin. It offered a decadent society a way forward to redemption. Thus the nightmare of total war became intertwined with the dream of universal peace.

By contrast, 18th-century Europeans had previously accepted war as part of life, treating it as a means for states to pursue specific objectives. Rulers weighed costs against benefits and imposed limits on violence. These attitudes reflected a backlash against the brutality of the wars that had followed the Reformation and the breakdown of medieval political institutions, but they also derived from other values. Bell sketches a culture built upon order, balance, and restraint in which public culture among the elite imposed demanding standards of self-control. Nobles performed roles according to set rules, the violation of which brought ostracism and ridicule. Army officers identified themselves as noblemen rather than military professionals, and they followed an aristocratic rather than a professional code. However artificial the old regime's conventions might have been, they protected noncombatants and limited the ferocity of war during an age in which the lethality of weapons had increased.

The cultural transition Bell describes in *The First Total War* amounts to what Scottish thinkers of the time called “a revolution in manners.” It came gradually at first. A memoirist later reflected, “We were walking on a carpet of flowers and did not notice the abyss beneath.”

Feeling displaced reason and self-control as the guiding social principle. Widely read philosophers attacked war as contrary to human nature and criticized the existing social order as an impediment to peace. International politics became increasingly competitive, and French writers came to view Rome's total destruction of Carthage as a parallel to their country's competition with Britain.

When the dam broke in 1789, ideological currents were released that had previously been mere abstractions. The desire to tear down society completely and rebuild it from scratch made any continuity with the past impossible. A May 1790 debate over the king's power to wage war severed chivalry from warfare and at the same time broke the bonds of service between crown and nobility. Instead of fighting for their king, Frenchmen took up arms to promote ideals. The outbreak of war with Austria and other powers aiming to suppress the revolution accelerated the dynamic. Violence offered a cleansing release, and the prospect of achieving the millennium through a final convulsive effort set the new tone. Ideological war demanded a total commitment that ruled out compromise or mercy.

The clash between revolution and counter-revolution in the Vendée between 1793 and 1796 presented the former with an existential challenge. The suppression of the insurgency by the new French government set a paradigm that lasted for decades. The people of the Vendée, a deeply conservative region in western France where the Catholic Church commanded great loyalty, had gained nothing from the revolution save higher taxes and conscription. Attempts to suppress Christianity detonated revolt in a rough country almost designed for resistance. Early successes produced a brief chance for the counterrevolutionaries to march on Paris. The French government responded with a notorious war of extermination that Bell calls “so gruesome that historians have never really stopped to consider just how fantastical it was in the first place.” The sheer

sadism astonishes. Troops were ordered to kill all living things. Women and children became targets in efforts that rival more recent horrors in Cambodia and Rwanda. When bayonets and gunfire proved insufficient, authorities drowned masses of prisoners in barges sunk in the Loire. By defining opponents as a pestilence to be wiped out by any means necessary, the government cast aside all limits. Rejecting the term “genocide,” Bell adjudges the suppression of the revolt to be “a ghastly crime, as well as an indelible stain on the Revolution.”

Events in the Vendée occurred in a wider context, and Bell describes war during the 1790s as a “meaningful and dynamic activity in its own right.” Emigration among the officer corps and the opening of military careers to talent ratcheted up a Hobbesian competition in which the most ruthless and devious thrived. Militarism emerged as soldiers formed a distinct professional class apart from civilians. Romantic transcendence replaced service and self-sacrifice as the ethos of the army. Napoleon Bonaparte and other generals climbed to power over the wreckage of the old regime. The Grande Armée gained power, prestige, and profit from war, and part of Napoleon’s success lay in making warfare pay for itself. He won political support by rewarding soldiers through conquest—but that required more and more war. Peace would remove the glue that held Napoleon’s support together and give adversaries a chance to turn back events. Only total victory could provide the security he demanded. Indeed, the quest for absolute security became a central feature of total war as armies sought to inflict a Carthaginian peace on their foes

Older accounts describe the revolution as reaching its end by the later 1790s, but Bell stresses a continuity lasting until 1815. The new militarism had made possible Napoleon’s career, and his coming to power merely changed its focus. Napoleon quashed the turbulence of the 1790s that foreign critics dubbed anarchy, but he never aimed at restoring the old regime. Instead he put the army in charge. This new prestige and privilege

set the military not just apart but above the rest of society. Treaties that ended the French Revolutionary Wars only marked a pause in his struggle for European hegemony. Napoleon could not tolerate foreign rivals who might resume their challenge given a chance. Shifting the costs of war onto the conquered made war pay, but it also demanded constant vigilance against revolt. The whole dynamic required an absolute victory that pushed Napoleon to reject compromise with Britain and eventually attempt the conquest of Russia.

Just as the transformative project of the Revolution pushed the Vendée to revolt, Napoleon’s occupation policies created insurgencies in Calabria, the Tyrol, and especially in Spain. Harsh repressive measures provoked backlash and further resistance. Francisco Goya captured the new world order in his acclaimed series of paintings “Disasters of War,” depicting the struggles in Spain. Even where opposition did not exist, the need for resources alienated local groups. Total war did not allow France to impose its will on the enemy, but simply increased the violence on both sides. Although Napoleon’s downfall came from the combined armies of Austria, Prussia, and Russia (all backed by British gold), struggles on the periphery bled his regime and goaded him into overreaching.

Napoleon left a legacy his contemporaries found more toxic than intoxicating. Lord Liverpool saw war itself as revolutionary in the context of the 1810s and peace as the essential precondition for stability. The statesmen who vanquished Napoleon made a concerted effort to create a stable international system that would impose constraints on war. Far from turning back to an old order that could not be restored, Metternich and his colleagues faced the challenge of rebuilding on shaky ground. They largely succeeded, as total war was banished for a century. Even when colonial wars turned brutal, conflicts in Europe remained limited. This renewed stability allowed bourgeois civilization to flourish until another general war brought cataclysm in 1914.

Given Bell’s description of total war as a culturally rooted phenomenon, it is worth noting how wider social trends shaped its subsequent history. Assumptions that constrained both violence and the pursuit of power during the 19th century gave way to different premises. Social Darwinism and Marxism, along with the Wilsonian project of making the world safe for democracy, provided intellectual underpinnings for a new round of total wars. The desire for absolute security, faith in the transformative power of violence, and a willingness to demonize adversaries characterized 20th-century warfare. Although the comparison lies beyond the scope of the book, the First World War had a similar impact as did the French Revolution in removing institutional constraints and feeding a cycle of violence.

Bell’s vivid account of a defining era written with an eye on today’s headlines. His interpretation shatters cherished myths about the French Revolution and Napoleon and casts both in a new light. What had once been seen as liberation from the stifling rule of king, church, and nobility comes into focus as the repudiation of moral restraint. Burke saw clearly what the Revolution would bring, and there is no better thinker to turn to in making sense of the upheavals of the 20th century.

No conflict since 1945 matches in scale or scope the struggles Bell describes, but he makes a convincing case that the logic of total war survives. It offers tempting possibilities for those seeking quick solutions to inexorable problems—especially when others do the dirty work required. How total war can be brought within limits presents what may become a defining question in the 21st century. Prudence and realism may be out of step with the polarized public discourse in the United States over the past decade; nevertheless, they offer the best hope for an answer. ■

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# Brown-Eyed Girl

Oh, the hope-draining, soul-crushing tiresomeness of it. I find in *Psychology Today* a piece called “Ten Politically Incorrect Truths about Human Nature,” explaining

various aspects of behavior in Darwinian terms. The smugness of that “politically incorrect” is characteristic of those who want a sense of adventure without risk. Nothing is more PC than an evolutionary explanation, unless it explains obvious racial differences that we aren’t supposed to talk about.

The authors are going to explain why we mate as we do. “Blue-eyed people,” they write, “are considered attractive as potential mates because it is easiest to determine whether they are interested in us or not.” Or men like blue eyes because, since eyes dilate when the owner is interested and since blue eyes better show a large pupil, men will know when women are interested. This produces more children.

Ponder the solemn fatuity of this. Does any reader over the age of 13 believe that women with any sort of eyes have trouble letting a man know when they are interested? The authors need to get out more.

Why is this sort of storytelling so widely engaged in when an alert porcupine would reject it? Because it is PC. The authors would find an evolutionary explanation for a loose doorknob.

To be fair, the greater reproductive success of the blue-eyed does explain why they predominate around the planet, with the exception of small population pools such as China, Africa, the Arab world, Southern Europe, Japan, India, Mexico, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and South and Central America. It’s because men in all those dark-eyed, underpopulated places can’t tell when women are interested.

Next, the authors say that blonde hair evolved because it loses luster with age, signaling to a man that a woman is too old to have healthy offspring.

This would seem to indicate that blondes evolved after the invention of shampoo, since the hair of women who never bathe is presumably something short of lustrous. Doubtless men married to blondes—marriage seems to be something of a pattern—stop boinking them when their hair dulls, while men married to brunettes keep at it, producing the swarms of defective kids that one usually sees in China, Mexico...

Again, note the absurdity. Do you have difficulty distinguishing between brunettes of 15 and 55, despite dentistry, hair conditioners, and facial creams? Say the authors, bloneness evolved in Scandinavia because women were covered with clothes and, without hair-luster as a signal, men couldn’t tell how old they were. This explains why so many young Eskimo men mate with grandmothers.

Next, breasts. The authors assert that men like big-breasted women because big ones sag at an early age, warning that the gal is too old to have healthy progeny. This is wonderfully silly. If big hooters discouraged further reproduction, the evolutionary benefit to the woman would seem exiguous, and big boobs ought to vanish.

An assumption underlying most discussions of the subject is that mating is entirely physical. The man takes the woman with the biggest breasts and bluest eyes. Perhaps this could be demonstrated with water buffalo. It isn’t what I see among people.

Rather, men want a woman who is reasonably cute, not fat, and, by whatever the standards of the particular man, likeable. Conducive to the latter condition are brains, sense of humor, minimal bitchiness, and being a decent human being. With the exception of brains, these are not evolutionarily respectable categories.

Yet in my experience, bright, vivacious, good-humored, dark-haired, and small-bazoomed easily trumps the reverse.

In general, a difficulty with grasping the evolutionary logic here is that of knowing whether it is thought to apply to the civilized. One reads in numerous sources that mankind, having left Africa, moved to colder climes and evolved greater intelligence to deal with the problems of survival in cold places. The implication is that intelligence increases fitness and should lead to the production of more offspring.

But what one sees today is that the bright have fewer children than the dull, and whole populations of the heretofore fit are rapidly diminishing. If fitness is measured by reproductive abundance, then fitness has diminished mightily in a few decades.

Is intelligence not a constituent of fitness? Or has natural selection stopped—assuming, or course, that it worked up to some point? Or is something else going on?

To force mating into the mold of reductionist fitness-shopping, it is necessary to connect beauty and sexual attractiveness with fitness. This is easily done by making up stories. I can do it by the hour: Wide-set eyes improve depth perception and prevent death when jumping about on rocks. Even teeth cut food more efficiently, avoiding the metabolic burden of inefficient chewing which, in time of famine, would lead to starvation. Ready laughter clears the lungs and avoids pneumonia. Shiny blonde hair reflects sunlight better and makes it easier for men to find fertile women at a distance.

But it reeks of improvisation, of beginning with a conclusion and putty-knifing the logic. I think of those millions of pitiful Chinese women, sobbing quietly in corners, “Oh, how can I let him know I’m interested when I have these horrible dark eyes? Maybe I can write him a letter...” ■