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Hervé Drévillon, *L'individu et la guerre: Du chevalier Bayard au soldat inconnu*. Paris: Belin, 2013. 320 pp. 25.00€. (cl). ISBN 978-2-7011-7694-9.

Review by David A. Bell, Princeton University.

France spent most of the early modern period either preparing for, embroiled in, or recovering from war, yet for a long time, historians in France itself paid surprisingly little attention to it. War could always be seen on the early modern historical horizon, exacerbating mortality crises and driving the state's insatiable need for revenue, but it rarely took up the front of the stage, especially in the heyday of the *École des Annales*. French historians largely neglected the period's "operational" military history, and did not do much better—despite important work by André Corvisier and Jean-Paul Bertaud—with what Anglophone historians called "war and society."<sup>[1]</sup>

Over the past fifteen years, though, the situation has begun to change. Among recent French authors to take early modern French warfare seriously, one thinks for instance of Marc Belissa, Marie-Pierre Rey and Hervé Drévillon, author of the important *L'Impôt du sang*.<sup>[2]</sup> Drévillon has founded an exciting new "Institut des Études sur la Guerre et Paix." And now Drévillon has published a sweeping, book-length essay that deals with warfare over a four-hundred year period, from the Renaissance through World War I. Although in theory focused on the relationship between individual combatants and military organizations, the book ventures to offer much broader and more ambitious conclusions. It is an elegant, but also problematic piece of work.

Drévillon structures the book around an opposition between two broad conceptions of warfare. In the first, even while subjecting soldiers to strict discipline, military organizations respect them as individuals, and allow them an important measure of free will. In the second, the soldiers' individuality dissolves into the mass, they lose free will entirely, and risk their lives only as a result of an "irrational sacrificial drive"\* (p. 278). Drévillon derives the distinction from Durkheim, who proposed it in his 1915 pamphlet *L'Allemagne au-dessus de tout*, which crudely associated the first model with France, and the second with Germany.<sup>[3]</sup> Drévillon instead sees both of them present in France itself, although he argues that the second fully emerged only in the decades before World War I. In addition, while Durkheim saw the two conceptions as broad "mentalities" (p. 9), Drévillon tries to show how they translated into actual tactical doctrine and practice. For instance, the formal tactical doctrine adopted by the French military in 1875 prescribed dispersed infantry formations which gave individual soldiers considerable initiative.

Twenty years later, however, the army reversed course entirely. It promulgated a new doctrine which insisted on "particularly dense" formations that dissolved individuals into "masses of men animated by an irresistible offensive élan" (pp. 243, 242). Drévillon insists that shifts of this sort had a logic of their own, grounded in styles of command and the evolution of armaments. Throughout the book he attempts to trace the way in which this logic intersected—and, at times, conflicted—with larger political and cultural imperatives.

Dré villon traces the first conception all the way back to the Renaissance, and to what he terms a “military humanism” exemplified by Machiavelli. This humanism had considerable success in France, the book contends, even if its implicit egalitarianism jibed poorly with the hierarchical nature of French society and with “the survival of the aristocratic culture of war” (p. 46). It came under heavy pressure in the seventeenth century, as royal ministers sought to reconstitute the military as a professional force, subordinated to the “orders and values” of royal service (p. 78). In this new military universe, shaped by absolutist *raison d'état*, soldiers found their *raison d'être* in an ideal of honor, and Dré villon quotes Blaise de Montluc's well-known dictum on the subject: “Our lives and our goods belong to our Kings; our souls belong to God; but our honor is our own” (p. 85). But in the eighteenth century, as new ideas for military reform percolated, the older ideal staged a remarkable comeback, typified by the reformer Joseph Servan's remark: “What could be more absurd? To wish for the same man to be a hero in the enemy's presence and a slave in yours” (p. 142). In short, the army exemplified an Old Regime increasingly torn between principles of privilege and new practices of equality.

Dré villon believes that the Revolution marked the triumph of the “military humanist” model. He sees powerful connections between the granting of full civil rights to soldiers, the destruction of noble privilege which allowed privates to rise to officer rank, and the large-scale tactical use of independently-operating skirmishers. The Revolution, in fact, marked the “apogee” of war as “a matter of individuals confronting other individuals” (p. 11). Dré villon wholly rejects the idea that the Revolution marked the start of a period of “total war”—an idea advanced by Jean-Yves Guimar and myself, among others.[4] Indeed, he devotes an entire chapter to this criticism. He does suggest that, under Napoleon Bonaparte, the French art of war became increasingly concerned with “the effect of the mass,” and an insistence on soldiers' self-sacrifice (p. 208). But he sees this shift growing out of the specific strategic and tactical contexts of Napoleonic warfare and not out of a political or cultural dynamic with roots in the Revolutionary period. The concept of “total war,” he insists, produces “excessive confusion” (p. 202).

The final chapters of the book take the story up to the First World War, in which, Dré villon contends, the cult of the sacrificial offensive eclipsed the older ideal, leading directly into the slaughterhouse of the trenches. Along the way, he traces the increasing emphasis on the psychology of the soldier, the development of the cult of Napoleon, and the influence (deleterious, in his opinion) of Clausewitz on French military thinking. By the 1890s, the two opposing conceptions of war had fully crystallized. One was expressed by conservative officers such as Ferdinand Foch, who venerated Napoleonic offensive tactics, and sought to reconcile them with the Republican heritage. On the other side stood Dré villon's heroes: Durkheim and especially the Socialist leader Jean Jaurès, who refused to see Napoleon as the heir of Lazare Carnot, and continued to defend the ideal of the independent, autonomous soldier in his writings on the army. Dré villon does not take the story up through World War I and does not make clear how the retention of the older tactical doctrine might have alleviated the horrors of 1914-1918. He ends the volume with praise for Philippe Pétain, whose loyalty to the older tactical doctrine presumably connected to his opposition to sacrificial offensive attacks as French Commander-in-Chief in 1917-18. But fleshing out this connection would require a more concerted overview of Pétain's entire wartime career.

Overall, *L'individu et la guerre* is a remarkably polished and erudite piece of work that sweeps confidently from armored cavalry and pikemen to barbed wire and machine guns, and from Machiavelli to Durkheim, all in scarcely 130,000 words. Furthermore, Dré villon has the confidence to posit a fundamental continuity in the art of war across this long and complicated period. The book is deeply thought-provoking. But is it convincing? Not entirely.

One problem comes from the fact that—inevitably, perhaps, given the book's scope—Dré villon has relatively little to say about the actual practice of war. He draws predominantly upon political literature, and works of strategic and tactical doctrine. Particularly for the period before the Revolution, he gives few reports from the army camp or the battlefield. He therefore puts little emphasis on such

developments as the new forms of drill and discipline that followed from the tactical revolution of the late sixteenth century, and which demanded that individual soldiers follow commands reflexively in maneuvers such as the countermarch (he does admit that this revolution led to “more constraining collective forms of deployment,” but quickly moves on to the way the Revolution’s use of skirmishers counteracted the trend [p. 127]). Many observers, however, believed that these new forms of drill and discipline reduced soldiers to automata, stripping them of the individual agency that Drévilleon associates with the early modern art of war in general.

Machiavelli himself might well have had similar thoughts, and this point suggests another problem with the book, namely that Drévilleon sometimes does not pay enough attention to key political distinctions. For one thing, in order to demonstrate the relative unity of early modern warfare, he treats Machiavelli as an emblem of a “military humanism” that even aristocratic commanders could embrace, and barely mentions the Florentine thinker’s republicanism. He therefore neglects the way Machiavelli, with his admiration of classical citizen armies, and his distaste for professional soldiers, could inspire a truly radical critique of Old Regime ways of warfare. In eighteenth-century Britain and North America, for instance, a powerful Whig Machiavellian tradition perceived powerful links between the institution of standing armies, the practice of Prussian-style military discipline, and the impulse to political tyranny. The only military force suitable for a free people, this tradition insisted, was a free militia fighting in loose order. From this point of view, the American and French Revolutions marked a decisive break in this history of western warfare. But Drévilleon, following Jaurès, wants to stress the tactical and operational continuities between the Old Regime and the Revolution, and so fails to take republicanism seriously enough.

His chapters on the Revolution again insist on these continuities, again at the price of underplaying the political context. Revolutionary conscription, he insists, “in the end evolved relatively little” from the Old Regime *milice* (p. 182). The actual numbers of soldiers raised in the Revolution did not significantly exceed seventeenth-century figures, especially when seen as a proportion of the population. Nor did war-time deaths. Far from marking a break with the military past, Drévilleon implies, the Revolution rather swept away the social and political obstacles that had blocked the full realization of military humanist ideals. Even the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte did not initially disrupt these patterns, Drévilleon adds. Only when the allies began copying the Emperor’s offensive tactics, particularly forced marches and shock attacks by concentrations of cavalry and of massive infantry columns, did numbers—of combatants and casualties—start to explode. Small wonder then that Drévilleon so intently opposes grouping the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods together under the label of “total war.”

Yet does Drévilleon really mean to deny that warfare, from 1792 onwards, intensified in a manner that had no precedent under the Old Regime? Gunther Rothenberg long ago calculated that, of all the major battles fought in Europe between 1490 and 1815, more than a fifth took place just in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods.[5] The wars brought about major alterations in the borders and/or the political systems of every major European state. Despite Napoleon’s many attempts to treat with his “brother sovereigns,” and to win recognition for his dynasty, he and the allies never managed fully to recognize each other as legitimate and honorable adversaries, with the result that the political stakes of the war remained hugely greater than under the Old Regime. Defeat meant not simply territorial adjustment, but political overthrow. In France, Spain, Portugal, Prussia and other states, the wars brought about efforts at national mobilization far greater than any seen before 1792. Of course revolutionary and Napoleonic conscription had precedents in the Bourbon *milice*, but Isser Woloch and Alan Forrest have demonstrated that it nonetheless had an unprecedented impact on French society, and indeed represented the single most intrusive and oppressive feature of what Woloch termed “the new regime.”[6] Drévilleon points out that Napoleon’s campaigns of 1805 and 1806 had low French casualty rates. But these campaigns had a political impact that went far beyond anything seen before 1789, especially the stunning defeat of Prussia in 1806, which Prussian elites themselves experienced as an unprecedented cataclysm.

It is true that the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods saw relatively few innovations in military technology and battlefield tactics. And despite the large spike in enrollments that followed the *levée en masse* of 1793, until relatively late the numbers of soldiers did not vary hugely from Old Regime norms. But the frequency of battles did. And as Drévilleon himself notes, by 1813, the Battle of the Nations at Leipzig brought together numbers that dwarfed anything seen under Louis XIV familiar with: 500,000 men, of whom well over 100,000 were killed or wounded (p. 177). Yet Drévilleon seems intent on keeping the frequency of battles, the scale of battle towards the end of the Empire, and the proliferation of guerrilla resistance against Napoleon, conceptually separate from the politics of war, including the inability of the two sides to accept each other as legitimate and honorable adversaries. Drévilleon criticizes the idea of “total war” for obscuring the “diversity of warrior logics” and “reducing war to a single dimension, thereby perpetuating confusion between its different strategic, operational and tactical dimensions” (pp. 178, 195). But he himself, in reaction to this idea, ends up sealing these dimensions off from one another to an implausible degree.

In fact, Drévilleon has reduced the idea of “total war” to a straw man. He seems to assume that it requires “postulating the existence of a common essence to all the wars waged between 1792 and 1815” (p. 187) and that it “reduces the diversity of war to a single matrix” (p. 202). Perhaps in some accounts it does. But of course even World War II encompassed many different sorts of battles, many different tactical and strategic doctrines, as well as many different sets of attitudes. It included both the “phony war” on the Western front and the battle of Stalingrad, both the humane treatment of Axis prisoners in the United States and the barbaric German treatment of Soviet prisoners. All these things were part of the same war—a total war if ever there was one. Despite what Drévilleon implies, the concept of “total war” does not mean that apocalyptic conditions of total mobilization, and absolute enmity against a demonized adversary, applied everywhere and everywhere, uniformly, for the duration of hostilities. At least as I defined it in the introduction to my book, *The First Total War* (which Drévilleon singles out for particular criticism), total war is better defined as a political dynamic which pushes combatants *towards* these conditions, and makes it impossible for them, ultimately, to limit the conflict. [7] In my analysis, the dynamic of war between 1792 and 1815 did have a fundamental unity, grounded in the culture of Enlightenment Europe, and in the revolutionary overthrow of an aristocratic social order that had managed to limit warfare in important ways before the Revolution. But this dynamic did not dictate a single strategic, operational and tactical character to war everywhere and everywhere during this period.

It is Drévilleon, in fact, who comes close to insisting on a single, nuance-erasing “common essence” to war with his theme of “individuals confronting other individuals.” Returning to the point in his epilogue, he remarks that during the French Revolution, “war was not total, for, in its ordinary forms, it confronted individuals who were considered as such” (“elle confrontait des individus considérés comme tels,” [p. 277]). But such phrases are, in fact, remarkably ambiguous. Who, exactly, was doing the “considering,” beyond the authors of abstract tactical doctrine who constitute Drévilleon’s most important sources? The individuals themselves? Their officers? The politicians who had ordered them to war, and who considered the war as an apocalyptic final conflict? Their civilian compatriots? Were the individuals “considered as such” in all circumstances? Why does this particular continuity matter more to the overall character of warfare than the political shifts that ultimately drove France to its greatest and most damaging defeat? *L’individu et la guerre* has many admirable qualities, and will be important reading for everyone interested in the history of early modern French warfare. But it leaves these questions largely unanswered.

## NOTES

\*All translations are by the reviewer unless otherwise noted.

[1] See especially André Corvisier, *L'armée française de la fin du XVIIe siècle au ministère de Choiseul. Le soldat* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964, two volumes); and Jean-Paul Bertaud, *La révolution armée: Les soldats-citoyens et la Révolution française* (Paris: Laffont, 1979).

[2] See especially Marc Belissa, *Fraternité universelle et intérêt national (1713-1795): Les cosmopolitiques du droit des gens* (Paris: Kime, 1998); Marie-Pierre Rey, *L'effroyable tragédie: Une nouvelle histoire de la campagne de Russie* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012); Hervé Drévilion, *L'Impôt du sang: Le Métier des armes sous Louis XIV* (Paris: Tallandier, 2005).

[3] Émile Durkheim, *L'Allemagne au-dessus de tout: La mentalité allemande et la guerre* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1915).

[4] Guiomar, Jean-Yves, *L'invention de la guerre totale: XVIIIe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Le Félin Kiron, 2004); David A. Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare As We Know It* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).

[5] Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Napoleon* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 61.

[6] See particularly Isser Woloch, *The New Regime: Transformations of the French Civic Order, 1789-1820s* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), pp. 363-409.

[7] Bell, *First Total War*, pp. 1-20.

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