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Hervé Drévilion, *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.

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I sincerely thank David Bell for his review of *L'Individu et la guerre*, which makes clear the deep disagreement between us, without betraying or caricaturing my thoughts, making this exchange solely a clash of ideas. I am especially grateful to him since, in many respects, my book is deeply indebted to Bell's *The First Total War*.^[1] To be honest, I probably would not have written the same book if I had not wanted to challenge Bell's arguments in *The First Total War*. Beyond the question of defining "total war" (and particularly the relevance of its application to the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars), the problem at stake is the relationship between war and politics.

In his review, David Bell recalls his definition of total war "as a political dynamic which pushes combatants *towards* these conditions, and makes it impossible for them, ultimately, to limit the conflict." *L'Individu et la guerre* is driven precisely by this question: what are the mechanisms that actually "push" a combatant to act and to break the bonds that limit conflicts? To put it in Clausewitzian terms, what are the mechanisms of the drive to "extremes"? Do they concern individuals and states the same way? David Bell's definition of "total war" leaves that question unanswered, since we do not know with which "combatants" he is dealing. Are they states or private soldiers? It seems to me that the answer to these questions is at the heart of our disagreement.

Nevertheless, before developing this idea, I would like to focus on some details of his criticisms. Let me begin with one in particular: I do not think I particularly praised Pétain. While he was teaching at the École Supérieure de Guerre from 1900 to 1905, Pétain's opinions were connected to a critical trend which seems more appropriately embodied by General Oscar de Negrier, author in 1900 of two remarkable articles published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. In addition, I am careful not to establish any connection between the Pétain of 1900-1905 and the later commander-in-chief of 1917, because it would be a dangerous and anachronistic illusion. However, I admit that it is difficult to study the history of military doctrine in the years 1870-1914 without having in mind the tragic outcome of 1914-1918.

David Bell notes that I do "not make clear how the retention of the older tactical doctrine might have alleviated the horrors of 1914-1918." This question actually occupied me constantly while I was writing my book. A complete answer would have required a "what if" history with which, as a French historian, I am not comfortable. Furthermore, I did not want my book to be read as an attempt to explain the brutality of the Great War. The story I tell ends on 1 August 1914, although, of course, its arguments have implications for the First World War that cannot be ignored.

I would therefore like to take the opportunity of this exchange with David Bell to consider a key question that I could not address directly in my book: Could the slaughter of the Great War have been avoided with a military doctrine more concerned with the fate of individual soldiers? Overall, I believe that the response is negative, but this assessment must be articulated in detail. Firepower multiplied by industrial capacities and massed troops would certainly have made this war particularly bloody. In addition, the defensive pattern advocated by Jaurès would only have precipitated the emergence of trench warfare that resulted from the stabilization of the Western

Front after the failure of the mobile warfare. Therefore, it seems difficult to imagine any alternative to the horror of the trenches.

However, one cannot help thinking that some carnage could have been avoided if the tactical patterns had been more respectful of the fate of the soldiers. The dramatic irrelevance of the French and German strategies in August 1914 caused a terrible bloodshed that was the direct result of an unshakable faith in the superiority of offensive. Thereafter, the obsessive search for a decisive breakthrough was responsible for a large number of deaths that could have been avoided. However, the adoption of a strictly defensive system would have amplified the tactical blockade of the trench warfare, which probably would have justified any attempt to overcome it, even at any cost.

Thus, my response to David Bell is that more attention to the fate of the soldiers probably would have prevented some futile slaughter, especially during the summer of 1914, but would not have changed the shape of entire war. Ultimately, the Great War could have been less bloody, but only marginally so. However, we have to consider that a “marginal” saving of perhaps 10 percent of losses would have spared 140,000 human lives for France alone!

That said, let us turn back to my book’s original intent—which was not to explain the Great War, but to raise the political question of the relationship between war and the individual. The First World War closed a long historical period, opened by Machiavelli’s *Art of War*, during which the collective organization of armies required the consideration of soldiers as individuals. The tension between the individual and the collective order was an integral part of the birth of the modern army, which was itself the result of a mathematized art of war, in which each individual became a geometrical point, an algebraic unit. See, for instance, the way that, in the eighteenth century, administrative records kept track of each soldier’s name, *nom de guerre*, date and place of birth, physical description, enlistment and re-enlistment dates, and any change of status (promotions, for instance). These records reflect the binary in which the soldier was (literally) inscribed: he was incorporated into a collective order which subsumed, in part, his individuality while at the same time acknowledged him as a unique entity with his own personal history and physical appearance.

Michel Foucault analyzed this kind of paradox in *Surveiller et Punir*, albeit by constructing a somewhat loose chronology of disciplinary structures. Foucault dated the emergence of individual combat to the beginning of the eighteenth century, during a period when military regulations were actually increasing collective constraints. Foucault was right, however, to identify a potential affirmation of the individual in military regulations, even if he misunderstood when and how this individuality would be realized. The disciplinary enterprise does not in fact take aim at an undifferentiated mass. In order to be effective, it must address individuals as such. According to Foucault, the disciplinary machine is one “whose principle is no more the mass, moving or stationary, but a geometry of divisible segments whose basic unit is the mobile soldier with his rifle.”[2]

L’Individu et la guerre aims to analyze this issue as a political pattern, from Machiavelli to Jaurès. According to Bell, studying such a continuity led me to underestimate the impact of political changes that took place during these four centuries of history. Bell asserts that “Drévilion sometimes does not pay enough attention to key political distinctions.” This criticism concerns, in particular, the issue of the Revolutionary rupture and its military dimensions. Bell argues that “Drévilion, 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.” Here we are at the very heart of our disagreement.

Dealing with the long range of four centuries does not mean the denying of political contexts. I fully acknowledge the republican nature of Machiavelli’s thought. This is the central issue of my book, which aims to highlight the military character of the “Machiavellian moment,”[3] which affirmed soldiers as individuals. Actually, I tried to demonstrate that there was a kind of republican impulse in early modern armies, even when they were professional. This impulse fed a process that I usually call the “military origins” of the French Revolution.

Therefore, republicanism is the real issue of my book, since I seek to understand, not only how war made republics, but also how republics made war. This question, which concerned both the First and the Third Republic, obsessed Jaurès and Durkheim, my “heroes,” according to David Bell. How could a republic (and especially the Third Republic) give birth to a mass war, since its political and military organization required the promotion of soldiers as individuals, by acknowledging their “dignity of man and of citizen?”[4] The logic of “total war” is a crisis of republicanism, not its fulfillment. I took very seriously the fact that, in its genealogy, according to Daudet and Ludendorff, “total war” was an anti-republican concept since it was, for its first users, a way to overcome republicanism.

Therefore, I do not contest at all (nor indeed did Jaurès) the importance of the French Revolution as a rupture in military and political history. I certainly do not dispute that the wars of the Revolution and First Empire radically changed the political and military face of France and Europe. But I challenge the idea that the political revolution led revolutionary armies into a bidding war in pursuit of an ideological goal that broke all the limits of war. The transposition of a political dynamic to the military field requires some caution. It might be possible to measure the feudal, monarchical, or republican character of a military organization, but how can this political characterization be extended to the actual practice of warfare and its most basic forms, such as combat and bodily violence? How do we move from the condemnation of war by the Enlightenment to the Revolutionary (or Napoleonic) politics of war and then to the construction of a military system and, finally, to the actual practice of combat? According to David Bell, the link between these different levels of reality is driven by a “political dynamic,” which gives sense to the concept of total war. This “political dynamic” seems fundamentally based on what Bourdieu would have called a “transfer.”

To understand this issue, it is necessary to leave temporarily the field of the history of war and see how, for example, Erwin Panofsky establishes a link between Gothic architecture and scholasticism.[5] In the afterword to his French translation of this work, Pierre Bourdieu explains that Panofsky analyses Gothic architecture at an iconological level, by treating it as a symptomatic expression of a worldview forming a “mental habit.” So, a link is established between a single practice (architecture in this case) and a mental framework. According to Bourdieu, “the practice of a person or at least individuals in a social group or a specific level of education tend to be a system, so that a certain type of practice in any field of culture is associated with a very high probability with an equivalent type of practice in all other areas.” According to Bourdieu, the circulation between the different types of practice is achieved by “transfer.” The notion of “transfer” gives coherence to the system since, according to Bourdieu, “generating schemes of *habitus* apply by simple transfer to the most different areas of practice.”[6]

Going back to the notion of “total war,” we can see that the interpretation of war as the result of a political change requires the definition of a political *habitus* which, through a series of transfers, invests different fields of social practice, from the sphere of political debate to the military field. The identification of the “mental habit” responsible for the Revolutionary Wars therefore remains the essential operation of the analysis proposed by David Bell. It provides coherence to the concept of “total war.”

Conversely, I borrow from Bernard Lahire’s *Culture des individus* the notion of “imperfect transfer,” which seems more faithful to the complexity of the relations between war and politics.[7] Considering the actual practice of war as the result of “imperfect transfers,” I challenge the Clausewitzian paradigm of war (amplified by Raymond Aron’s interpretation) as the continuation of politics. I think, rather, that war is, by itself, a political experience and therefore has the potential to transform politics. Therefore, two major questions need to be asked. How can a political intention be translated into a military action? To answer this question, one has to consider that the military implementation of a political goal is not neutral. How can a political “dynamic” (quoting Bell) be transferred to the level of each individual soldier? My answer to this question is highly indebted to John Lynn’s *Bayonets of the Republic*, which clearly demonstrated that the soldiers’ motivations could not be reduced to a simple reflection of the political nature of the Revolution.[8]

Trying to answer these two questions led me to challenge the idea that the Revolutionary Wars became “total” because the government, as well as the soldiers, were pursuing an absolute political goal. First, it seemed to me necessary to make clear what is usually meant by “total” and to correct some approximations about the extent and intensity of Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. In particular, it occurred to me that the assumption of “total war” was based on poor numerical estimates. That is why I have reviewed in detail the criteria generally mobilized to characterize the situation of “total war”: losses in battles, losses in war in general and global number of soldiers raised during wars. For any of these criteria (and all of them combined), I tried, but failed, to find a clear break which would support the hypothesis of a Revolutionary rupture.

Bell suggests that I should have taken into account the criterion of the frequency of battles. This is a fair criticism, but I do not think it would have changed my conclusion. The impact of the frequency of battles depends, above all, on their intensity. For instance, Bonaparte’s Italian campaign of 1796-1797 was a succession of low-intensity battles (with a loss rate always below 10 percent dead and wounded) which had a decisive result at a very moderate cost. Of course, the sequence of bloody battles (for instance Essling-Wagram), may suggest a radicalization of war. That said, however, all the criteria considered together suggest that only the period 1812-1813 (or 1810-1813) could be considered as an actual transgression of previous limits of war. But this relatively short period represents an exception, a peak intensity, rather than the expression of an essence of war whose origins would date back to 1792.

I propose, following the lead of Gaston Bodart [9], that the revolutionary battles were the least bloody of the entire modern era, with loss rates generally below 10 percent. In 1794, the search for a decisive victory led to the battle of Fleurus, won at the cost of a very low casualty rate (5.6 percent for the victors and 2.5 percent for the vanquished). After 1807, the search for decisive victories led Napoleon to engage in major battles whose loss rate frequently exceeded 20 percent, and sometimes 30 percent (such as Borodino). The same principle--the search for decisive victory--therefore produced, in 1794 and in 1812, quite different effects. Do we have here a single war, subject to variations in shape and intensity? Or does the difference between the battles of 1794 and those of 1812 suggest a difference in the military and political nature of war?

The response needs to take into account the realities of war, which David Bell accuses me of ignoring or underestimating. Bell claims that “Drévilion has relatively little to say about the actual practice of war.” This criticism is the only one in Bell’s review that seems unfair, since much of my archival research and many of my publications are specifically devoted to the actual practice of war. For instance, a particular attention to the reality of battlefields led me to highlight the specific violence of wars in the old regime, which, I think, David Bell underestimates. Unlike my previous book, *Batailles*[10], *L’Individu et la guerre* does not consider any battle in particular, but the actual practices of war are still taken into account.

In particular, I wanted to make clear how the Revolutionary battles were different from those of the Old Regime and of the Empire, especially in view of the use of firearms and its violence, both physical and psychological. Tactical patterns of the eighteenth century enclosed soldiers in static formations in which compliance with regulations and firing procedures limited individual initiative and alternative forms of combat. Fire by rank, then fire by squad (adopted by ordinance for the exercise of infantry in 1764) were very demanding in terms of discipline. Firing by squad, for instance, required a complex formation to enable the different parts of a battalion to shoot at the same time. Linear warfare required passive submission to a grueling discipline. After the 1770s, an emerging reconceptualisation of military order created more room for individuality and personal initiative. The firing regulations of 1776 took into consideration the situation of each private soldier in the collective order. Under the influence of small war practices, the development of light troops (infantry, as well as cavalry) promoted combat tactics based on individual initiative, rather than collective discipline. This was an actual practice of war, whose evolution, *combined with* (but not *resulting from*) political changes, shaped the wars of the French Revolution.

Therefore, I do not deny the specificity of a republican moment. On the contrary, it is precisely in order to highlight the specificity of this moment that I distinguished it from the Napoleonic era and examined how the Revolutionary Wars became Imperial. David Bell accuses me of having underestimated “the political shifts that ultimately drove France to its greatest and most damaging defeat.” In turn, one might blame Bell for not taking republicanism seriously enough, since he neglects the fact that the First Republic won its wars, but the Empire ultimately lost. Far from ignoring those “political shifts,” I have tried to understand how they combined with military developments to drive France first to victory, then to defeat. In other words, I tried to understand why the First Republic was so irresistibly victorious, before Napoleon’s defeat destroyed what the Republic had built. This is my way of taking republicanism seriously. Following Jaurès, I wanted to demonstrate that, despite some obvious continuities (such as conscription and a “national” impulse), war changed its nature from Valmy to Waterloo. To me, the key point of this transformation of war is the way it dealt with individuals.

The expression “*levée en masse*” created a misunderstanding among historians who misinterpreted the word “mass.” I challenge the idea that the “*levée en masse*” automatically caused the emergence of a mass war and of tactics based on the exploitation of numerical advantage. The 23 August 1793 decree of the “*levée en masse*” inspired Carnot’s system of war which in theory represented a mass war. Of course, on this occasion, France mobilized for war more fully than it had ever done before, but even this did not produce a “total war.” During the Flanders Campaign of 1794, Carnot’s operational system was closer to Turenne’s economy of means than to some of Napoleon’s costly campaigns, although it was based on similar principles (mobility, concentration of forces, search for decision).

Never forget that if the Revolutionary armies were numerous, they were confronted with coalitions that overwhelmed them numerically. Also remember that this use of tactical preponderance in a situation of strategic numerical inferiority was also an essential part of Frederick II’s art of war. Napoleon himself had to deal in different ways with the issue of preponderance. In 1814, he maneuvered in France as if in a foreign country, considering popular support as worthless, even while he had the institutional capacity to mobilize masses of men. Clausewitz criticized Napoleon’s strategy, considering it as a mistake. Clausewitz’s analysis of the 1814 campaign seems to me symptomatic of an excessive essentialization of Napoleonic Wars. According to him: “No campaign exemplifies the processes of strategic thought as clearly as the campaign of 1814 in France. To begin with, it belongs to a period which the element of war moves rapidly and freely. ... Both sides are driven by a great purpose and neither is prepared to engage in those temporizing measures with which belligerents in former times used to spin out a campaign in a reasonable and acceptable manner.”^[11] But, unfortunately, Napoleon’s 1814 campaign hardly matched Clausewitz’s statement on the essence of war. That is the reason why he characterized Napoleon’s action as a mistake, considering that the actual practice of war did not mirror what it should have been in theory.

I think that the concept of “total war” drives Bell along the same track. Among my “heroes,” Bell listed Durkheim and Jaurès. He should have probably added Jomini, who did not consider war as an essence but as an empirical reality, especially regarding the issue of compulsory military service. According to Bell, “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.” There is no doubt about it. But what I deny is that such a militia would necessarily be a key element of a “total war.” According to Jomini, I think that there are many different sorts of militia and many different ways to use them. Therefore, I think that the concept of “total war” does not help to take these variations into account. At most, it might have some relevance in specific circumstances, such as the 1812-1813 period, but not as a global concept.

But, renouncing the concept of “total war” in favor of the issue of the individual, did I myself promote “a single, nuance-erasing ‘common essence’ to war with his theme of ‘individuals confronting other individuals’”? I acknowledge that the question deserves to be asked. I wanted to propose an alternative perspective on war, in order to understand why the Great War appeared to

me so different from the former wars. I certainly attempted to treat the issue of “individuals confronting other individuals” not as an essence, but as a key to understanding the changing character of warfare and to overcoming some of the characterizations commonly in use. More than an essence, the individual offers a viewpoint into war.

This leads us to David Bell’s last questions: “Who, exactly, was doing the ‘considering,’ beyond the authors of abstract tactical doctrine who constitute Drévilion’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?” The answers to these questions are easy to find in my book. Private soldiers were considered as individuals by political institutions as well as military regulations, practices, and theories. Of course, these evolutions were connected to deep cultural trends (such as humanism, the Enlightenment, Romanticism or, more broadly, individualism), as I frequently mentioned in my book. Since I wrote an interpretive essay rather than a monograph, military theorists are taken as illustrations, rather than as evidence. They are more suggestive than demonstrative. The actual sources of my work are much more diverse, composed of all the archival and printed material that I have collected over my entire career as a military historian. It was impossible to put all of them together in a systematic and comprehensive inventory covering the four centuries of history that are examined in this book. That is both the limit and freedom allowed by an essay.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize how pleased I am to have been invited to engage in this sharp, but friendly, debate with David Bell. However, I have to apologize for the awkward style in my response, but writing it in English was, for me, both a courtesy to David Bell and a tribute to the language that coined the word “private” to name a soldier—a word for which there is no equivalent in French, and which suggests perfectly that a soldier is also an individual.

NOTES

[1] David Bell, *The First Total War* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007).

[2] Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 192. See also, Alain Ehrenberg, *Le corps militaire. Politique et pédagogie en démocratie* (Paris: Aubier, 1983).

[3] I do not really grant the same significance to the “Machiavellian moment” as Pocock, but I do consider “Republic” to be more than an institution.

[4] Charles Chabroud, *Rapport et projet de loi sur les délits et les peines militaires* (Imprimerie Nationale, 1791), p. 25.

[5] Erwin Panofsky, *Architecture gothique et pensée scolastique*, translation and postface by Pierre Bourdieu (Paris: Minuit, 1967).

[6] Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Minuit, 1979), p. 196. All translations of Bourdieu are mine.

[7] Bernard Lahire, *La Culture des individus. Dissonances culturelles et distinction de soi*, (Paris: La Découverte, 2004).

[8] John A. Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic. Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791-94* (Boulder: Westview, 1996).

[9] Gaston Bodart, *Losses of Life in Modern Wars. Austria-Hungary; France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1916).

[10] Hervé Drévilion, *Batailles. Scènes de guerre de la Table ronde aux tranchées* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2007).

[11] Carl Von Clausewitz (Peter Paret, D. Moran, trans.), *Historical and Political Writings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 207.

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