

The culture of war in Europe, 1750–1815

DAVID A. BELL

FOR AN ESSAY ON WAR, this is going to start in a somewhat unusual manner. I am not going to plunge straight into a discussion of battles, or grand strategy. Instead, I am going to examine two classic passages from French literature that deal not with war, but with the problem of how to seduce a virtuous married woman. The first comes from Choderlos de Laclos's great novel of 1782, *Dangerous Liaisons*. It is an epistolary novel, and the letter in question is one of its climaxes. The vicomte de Valmont is describing to his correspondent, the marquise de Merteuil, how he has finally accomplished the seduction of the angelic Madame de Tourvel:¹

You will find, my friend that I used a pure method that will give you pleasure, and that I remained absolutely true to the principles of this war, which, as we have so often remarked, resembles so much the other sort. Judge me, therefore, as you would judge Marshal Turenne or Frederick the Great. The enemy wanted only to delay, but I forced it to do battle. Thanks to skilled manoeuvring, I was able to choose the terrain and the positions of the opposing forces. I managed to inspire in the enemy feelings of security, so as to be able to close with it more easily as it retreated. I managed to sow terror in its ranks before the battle; I left nothing to chance . . . Finally, I only launched my attack after ensuring that I would have a secure line of retreat, so as not to risk everything I had gained up to this point.

The second passage comes from a book published some forty-eight years later: Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*. It describes the first steps by which the young hero, Julien Sorel, seduces the mistress of the house where he works as a tutor, Madame de Rênal, taking her hand in his:²

¹ P.-A.-F. Choderlos de Laclos, *Les liaisons dangereuses*, ed. Y. Le Hir (Paris, 1999), at <http://gallica.bnf.fr/document?O=N101460>, Letter 125 ('Le Vicomte de Valmont à la Marquise de Merteuil').

² Stendhal, *Le rouge et le noir: Chronique de XIX^e siècle*, ed. P.-G. Castex (Paris, 1999), at <http://gallica.bnf.fr/document?O=N101497>, Book I, Chapter IX ('Une soirée à la campagne').

His expression, when he saw Madame de Rênal . . . was singular. He looked at her as if she were an enemy he was preparing to fight . . . He cut short the children's lessons, and then, when [her] presence . . . recalled him to the pursuit of his glory, he decided that tonight she absolutely would have to allow her hand to remain in his. As the sun set, and the decisive moment approached, Julien's heart beat in a singular manner . . . The horrible struggle that his duty was waging against his timidity was so painful for him he could not notice anything outside himself. The clock sounded out nine forty-five and still he had not dared do anything. Outraged at his own cowardice, Julien said to himself: At exactly ten I will do what I have been promising to do all day, or I will go upstairs and blow my brains out.

The first point I want to draw attention to is that in *both* these passages, the act of seducing a virtuous woman is compared to fighting a battle. But there are differences—striking differences. In Laclos, the tone of the seducer is utterly assured and confident. If seduction is like a battle, then it is like a battle in which absolutely nothing is left to chance. Everything is calculated, planned, down to the last detail. The forces are deployed perfectly, and even then a line of retreat is carefully guarded. The commander never has a moment's doubt. The battle as a whole amounts to a grand and strangely impersonal performance. Of course Laclos is setting up a terrific irony, for nothing would be less assured or predictable than the outcome of this particular encounter. But what matters here for the moment is the tone of this particular letter, before Valmont's 'victory' turns in strange directions. With Julien Sorel, of course, almost everything has changed. The tone of the seducer could not be less confident or more anguished. In this battle, nothing is prepared meticulously and nearly everything is left to chance. The attacker depends on sheer force and luck. There is no question of any sort of impersonal performance. What is at stake is Julien's very soul.

I would like to suggest that the contrast between these two passages amounts to rather more than just two different literary visions of the same act. It also helps us see a large and interesting shift in European understandings of warfare from the old regime to the early nineteenth century. In both cases, warfare is a metaphor used by a novelist, but the kinds of war evoked are very different. One might attribute the differences simply to the vagaries of two different literary imaginations. Both authors, however, reflected at length in other writings on the conduct of war, and they themselves had extensive military experience: Laclos wrote his novel while a serving officer; Stendhal fought for Napoleon as a dragoon and then accompanied the French army in the 1812 invasion of Russia. So the contrast might well reflect an evolution of war itself, rather than just the evolution of literary style. To show that it does, though, I need to shift gears and reflect in more general terms about the period 1750–1815. I will come back, however, to these passages, and to their significance.

I

The period between 1792 and 1815 saw an astonishing change in the physical intensity of European warfare. The figures speak for themselves. More than a fifth of all the major battles fought in Europe between 1490 and 1815 took place just in the twenty-five years after 1790.³ Before 1790, only a handful of battles had involved more than 100,000 combatants. In 1809, the battle of Wagram, the largest yet seen in Europe, involved 300,000. Four years later, the battle of Leipzig drew 500,000, with fully 150,000 of them killed or wounded.⁴ During the wars, France alone may have counted close to a million war deaths, including possibly a higher proportion of its young men than died in the First World War. The toll across Europe may have reached as high as five million.⁵ In a development without precedent, the wars brought about significant alterations in the territory or the political system of every single European state. It is not surprising that the great strategist Clausewitz saw in the wars of this period something that approached the ideal that he called 'absolute war'.⁶ As early as 1812, he expressed what he saw as the essential point about how warfare had changed from the pre-revolutionary period: 'Formerly . . . war was waged in the way that a pair of duellists carried out their pedantic struggle. One battled with moderation and consideration, according to the conventional proprieties . . . War was caused by nothing more than a diplomatic caprice, and the spirit of such a thing could hardly prevail over the goal of military honour . . . There is no more talk of this sort of war, and one would have to be blind, not to be able to perceive the difference with our wars, that is to say the wars that our age and our conditions require'.⁷

'One would have to be blind . . .'. Unfortunately, in recent years, historians of this period have in fact suffered, if not from blindness, then at least from extensive cataracts when it comes to perceiving these changes. They have done so for several reasons. To begin with, there is the influence of the diplomatic historian Paul Schroeder, who has argued in a magisterial work that the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars followed naturally from what he characterizes as the fundamental instability and violence of European international relations before 1789.⁸ Schroeder emphasizes this continuity because he sees military and diplomatic history as the

³ G. E. Rothenberg, *The art of warfare in the age of Napoleon* (Bloomington IN, 1978), 61.

⁴ D. Gates, *The Napoleonic Wars, 1803–1815* (London, 1997), 139; Rothenberg, *The art of warfare*, 81.

⁵ D. M. G. Sutherland, *The French Revolution and Empire: the quest for a civic order* (Malden MA, 2003), 371.

⁶ Carl von Clausewitz, *On war*, ed. and trans. M. Howard and P. Paret (Princeton, 1976), 579–81.

⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, 'Bekenntnisdenschrift,' in idem, *Schriften—Aufsätze—Studien—Briefe*, ed. W. Hahlweg, 2 vols (Göttingen, 1966), i. 682–751, esp. 750.

⁸ P. W. Schroeder, *The transformation of European politics, 1763–1848* (Oxford, 1994). His perspective prevails, for instance, in R. and I. Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy: the British and French from the Sun King to the present* (London, 2006).

story of attempts to solve what he calls 'the permanent, structural problems of international politics'.⁹ He takes for granted that most European statesmen have always had peace and stability as their principal goals (that they wanted 'a solution to war'). He therefore assumes that because both the periods before and after 1789 were characterized by virtually continuous warfare (in the entire eighteenth century, there were only one or two years in which no major power was at war), they were essentially similar: periods when statesmen 'failed' to stabilize the 'international system'.¹⁰ He does not really consider the possibility that, in an age when most European statesmen belonged to hereditary aristocracies that still defined themselves ultimately in terms of military service, these statesmen might have seen perpetual peace as undesirable. They might have sought only to limit the destructive effects of war—not end it forever. If we admit this possibility (and, I argue below, we should), then the fact that the major powers fought so frequently both before and during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods matters much less than the *way* they fought. And in this case, the huge differences in the scale, intensity and political consequences of war after 1792 to which I have just drawn attention recover their full importance.

Schroeder offers as principal evidence for his thesis the fact that 'overall, the ratio of battlefield deaths to the total population of Europe was about seven times as great in the eighteenth as in the nineteenth century'.¹¹ The comparison is only superficially impressive. First of all, by his own evidence (which he does not cite in his book, but only in an article), the actual number of eighteenth-century battlefield deaths amounted to less than 24,000 a year for the entire continent—a level that statesmen might well have considered acceptable, indeed normal. Secondly, he omits the period 1792–1815 from his comparison (again without saying so in the book). During this period, the number of battlefield deaths rose to at least 100,000 per year: over four times the pre-1792 figure.¹²

Schroeder's work on diplomacy fits in well with an influential trend among military historians that likewise plays down the rupture of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, instead emphasizing the broad continuities in military technology and tactics from the eighteenth into the early nineteenth century. These continuities were certainly very real. The period did see technical innovations, but none of them had a decisive effect on the actual battles. Indeed, a soldier from as far back as the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14) would have found himself relatively at home on the Napoleonic battlefield, where the principal weapons remained woefully inaccurate and difficult-to-load muskets with ring-lock bayonets, cannon firing either solid balls, canister or grapeshot, and swords wielded by

⁹ *Ibid.*, 577.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹² Schroeder does not present this evidence in his book, but in an article, 'The nineteenth-century international system: changes in the structure,' *World Politics*, 39/1 (1986), 1–26.

cavalry. Similarly, such basic tactics as the mustering of infantry into square, line and column remained highly recognizable between the eras of Marlborough and Wellington. For these reasons, a number of military historians have passionately rejected the idea (which I defended in a recent book) that the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars can be considered a 'total war'.¹³

These military historians of course recognize the massive political changes that accompanied the French Revolution. But they generally go on to argue that, particularly after the fall of Robespierre, these political changes had relatively little effect on the conduct of war. 'With Napoleon's seizure of power,' writes Ute Planert, 'the legitimization of war by revolution came to an end. The *Grand Empire* justified its wars in the interests of the *grande nation*. These interests closely resembled those of the French monarchy in the eighteenth century, be it mercantile and colonial rivalry with England or securing France's supposedly natural frontiers'.¹⁴ Planert's analysis (which recalls the classic work of Albert Sorel) leads in the same direction as Schroeder's, namely stressing the continuities between the pre-1789 period and 1789–1815.¹⁵

The analysis, however, seems misguided to me. First, it downplays the significance of the increasing number of battles and the intensifying death tolls. It also effectively discounts the importance for the conduct of warfare of the political upheavals that continued throughout the period (significant alterations in the territory or the political system of every European state). And in this connection it entirely disregards a critical political fact about the wars, namely that unlike under the old regime, neither side ever fully recognized the legitimacy of the other's regime, but instead most often aimed at its overthrow. Yes, Bonaparte on many occasions managed to sign alliances and peace treaties with his 'brother monarchs'. But these agreements nearly all ended in failure, and the allies ended up treating him exactly as the Jacobins and their enemies had treated each other, as a criminal:

In returning to France with plans for upheaval and disruption, he has deprived himself of the protection of the laws, and shown the entire universe that there can be neither peace nor truce with him. The Powers therefore declare that Napoleon Bonaparte has placed himself outside of civil and social relations, and that as an enemy and disturber of the peace of the world, he has subjected himself to public condemnation.¹⁶

¹³ M. Broers, 'The concept of "total war" in the Revolutionary-Napoleonic period,' *War in History*, 15/3 (2008), 247–68; U. Planert, 'Innovation or evolution? The French wars in military history' in R. Chickering and S. Förster, *War in an age of revolution: 1775–1815* (Washington/Cambridge, 2010), 69–84; J. Black, review of Bell, *First total war*, in *H-France Forum* (2007): www.h-france.net/forum/forumvol2/BlackOnBell1.html. For the opposing point of view, see D. A. Bell, *The first total war: Napoleon's Europe and the birth of warfare as we know it* (Boston, 2007), and my response to Black and others in *H-France Forum* (2007): www.h-france.net/forum/forumvol2/Bell1Response.html. See also J.-Y. Guiomar, *L'Invention de la guerre totale: XVIII^e–XX^e siècle* (Paris, 2004).

¹⁴ Planert, 'Innovation or evolution?', 71.

¹⁵ The reference is, of course, to A. Sorel, *L'Europe et la révolution française*, 8 vols (Paris, 1885–1906).

¹⁶ Quoted in R. Morrissey, *Napoléon et l'héritage de la gloire* (Paris, 2010), 168.

Would any European monarch before 1789 have been the object of such a statement?

Yet if we accept that warfare did change in extraordinarily important ways during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period, what brought these changes about? As already noted, technological and tactical innovation cannot be held responsible. If we look to older standard histories of the period, which (unlike Schroeder and the new military historians) agree that the French Revolution marked an important rupture, we instead generally find the most attention given to two broad political factors. First: revolutionary ideologies. These were wars between incompatible belief systems, one of which was making radically new claims for its universal validity and sought to spread itself by any means possible. Secondly: nationalism. These were no longer wars between dynastic houses, but between entire nations that were coming to new states of self-consciousness. Both explanations date back to the period itself. For ideology, we could quote Edmund Burke: 'It is with an armed doctrine that we are at war . . . if it can at all exist, it must finally prevail'.¹⁷ On the nationalist side, Clausewitz: 'The present war is a war of all against all. It is not kings who wage war on kings, not armies which wage war on armies, but whole peoples who wage war on other peoples'.¹⁸

I hardly wish to dismiss the importance of revolutionary ideology during this, of all periods. And having written an entire book on the origins of nationalism in revolutionary France, I do not wish to dismiss that subject either.¹⁹ Still, whenever we find an explanation of revolutionary events that seems to echo the explanations given by the revolutionary actors themselves, it is a good idea to be suspicious.

On the subject of revolutionary ideologies, the most obvious reason for suspicion comes from the chronology. Even during the radical period of the French Revolution, the French leadership disagreed violently on whether France should be fighting a war of liberation. After 1795, reason of state reasserted itself decisively in French foreign policy; and after Bonaparte took power, while the scale of warfare and the political stakes continued to grow, there nonetheless followed a rebirth of naked dynastic politics: he put three brothers and a brother-in-law on various European thrones and himself married the great-niece of Marie Antoinette. There have been endless debates about how far Napoleon remained a revolutionary, but no one has yet, as far as I am aware, suggested that he became more of one in the course of his imperial rule. But it was precisely during the later years of his Empire that the wars turned most radical, and most intense.

The subject of nationalism is more complicated. There is no doubt that this period saw the rise of distinctly nationalistic language and nationalist political projects

¹⁷ Edmund Burke, *Two letters addressed to a member of the present parliament, on the proposals for peace with the regicide directory of France* (London, 1796), 22–3.

¹⁸ Clausewitz, 'Bekenntnisdenschrift', 750.

¹⁹ D. A. Bell, *The cult of the nation in France: inventing nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge, 2001).

throughout Europe. The ideas of forging nations and mobilizing them entirely for war played a role in everything from France's 1793 *levée en masse* to Spain's 1808 rising against Napoleon and the German war of liberation of 1813. But there are still reasons to doubt nationalism's centrality to the transformation of war. For one thing, as I have argued in *The cult of the nation in France*, the concept of national war did not burst forth *ex nihilo* in the Revolution. It was already present in middle of the eighteenth century, at least in France and Britain. And after 1804, in France, the regime increasingly downplayed nationalistic language, in keeping with its revived dynastic and imperial ambitions. 'I must make all the peoples of Europe one people,' Napoleon told his police minister, Fouché, on one occasion.²⁰

Nationalist concepts had a surprisingly restrained effect on the actual conduct of military affairs as well. As revisionist military historians have convincingly argued, the ill-trained and ill-equipped soldiers of the *levée* helped the French war effort much less than is generally thought, and during most of the Napoleonic period a majority of French soldiers were professionals, not conscripts.²¹ In Austria and Prussia, attempts at general levies were even less impressive. The Prussian *Landsturm* of 1813, whose founding document was described by no less an authority than Carl Schmitt as the Magna Carta of modern partisan warfare, proved ineffective in practice and was drastically curtailed after just three months.²² As for the Spanish war, which textbooks still generally portray as a spontaneous rising of the entire Spanish people, fighting in the newly-named *guerrilla*, it was anything but. As Charles Esdaile has argued, most of the population remained aloof from the war. The guerrillas themselves drew heavily from the ranks of professional soldiers and outlaws, and their activities sometimes resembled organized crime as much as national liberation.²³

We need, in short, to move away from these explanatory factors. Not only do they echo rather too neatly the explanations of the actors themselves, they also reduce warfare itself to nothing more than an instrument of changing political goals. Of course, the idea of war as continuation of politics by other means (to coin a

²⁰ Quoted in A. Zamoyski, *Moscow 1812: Napoleon's fatal march* (New York, 2004), 9. On European integration, see S. Woolf, *Napoleon's integration of Europe* (London, 1991); O. Connelly, *Napoleon's satellite kingdoms* (New York, 1965).

²¹ S. P. Mackenzie, *Revolutionary armies in the modern era: a revisionist approach* (London, 1997), 33–50; C. Rousset, *Les volontaires, 1791–1794* (Paris, 1892); D. G. Chandler, *The campaigns of Napoleon: the mind and method of history's greatest soldier* (New York, 1966), 333–4; O. Connelly, *Blundering to glory: Napoleon's military campaigns*, rev. edn (Wilmington, 1999), 73–4.

²² G. E. Rothenberg, *Napoleon's great adversaries: the Archduke Charles and the Austrian army, 1792–1814* (Bloomington, 1982), 118–19; Rothenberg, *The art of warfare*, 242; M. V. Leggiere, *Napoleon and Berlin: the Franco-Prussian War in north Germany, 1813* (Norman OK, 2002), 57–8; C. Schmitt, *Theorie des Partisanen: Zwischenbemerkung zum Begriff des Politischen* (Berlin, 1963), 47.

²³ See especially C. J. Esdaile, *Fighting Napoleon: guerrillas, bandits and adventurers in Spain, 1808–1814* (New Haven, 2004). For the alternative view: J. L. Tone, 'Partisan warfare in Spain and total war' in Chickering and Förster (eds), *War in an age of revolution*, 243–59.

phrase) was itself very much a product of this period and of its most famous Prussian staff officer.²⁴ Rather than accepting Clausewitz's perspective without question, however, we need instead to consider war as a meaningful and dynamic activity in its own right and to look for changes in what could be called the cultural field of warfare, before and during the period 1792–1815.

II

To understand this cultural field of warfare, we need to start with the *ancien régime* and its armies. This is a world we know a great deal about in some ways, thanks to the work of military historians. And the most important point to underline is that it was fundamentally a world dominated by hereditary aristocracies. In every European state before 1789, the officer corps of the armed forces came overwhelmingly from the nobility, with the highest ranks, so to speak, dominating the highest ranks. In many states, only nobles could become officers; in the rest, commoners had very limited opportunities for promotion. But what consequences did these social practices have? For the most part, military and cultural historians have failed to address this question very seriously. They have noted certain salient facts: for instance, in almost all eighteenth-century European military schools, the pupils spent a considerable amount of time in dance classes. High-ranking officers brought sumptuous silverware and china with them on campaign, and paid enormous attention to dress and make-up. One French officer killed in battle in 1745 had seven extra pairs of silk stockings in his luggage.²⁵ These facts are known, but they are mostly presented as amusing details, or worse as signs of weakness and frivolity, as evidence of the decadence of a declining caste of play actors that was just waiting to be swept aside by the 'real soldiers' of the Revolutionary era.

There is, however, a certain cultural logic that links these practices to aristocratic culture in general and also to the nature of old regime war. The work of Norbert Elias reminds us that early modern European court societies cultivated remarkable forms of daily behaviour, based on astonishingly difficult standards of self-control.²⁶ Aristocrats were expected to make their public personas conform to carefully-developed models of behaviour, and to make use of a rigorously-defined and limited repertory of acceptable movements, gestures, language, even facial expressions.

²⁴ 'War . . . is a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means'. Clausewitz, *On war*, 87.

²⁵ A. Babeau, *La vie militaire sous l'ancien régime*, 2 vols (Paris, 1888–90), ii, 167. In general on the *ancien régime* military: C. Duffy, *The military experience in the age of reason* (New York, 1988); A. Corvisier, *L'armée française de la fin du XVII^e siècle au ministère de Choiseul: le soldat*, 2 vols (Paris, 1964).

²⁶ N. Elias, *The court society*, trans. E. Jephcott (New York, 1983); N. Elias, *The history of manners*, trans. E. Jephcott (New York, 1978).

Emotional responses had to be channelled into well-defined, acceptable forms. Noble life often deviated from this ideal standard, but the ideal remained powerful. What Elias did not consider, though, is that the same practices deployed in the 'theatre of the aristocracy' that was the court could also be observed in that other 'theatre of the aristocracy' that was warfare. Memoirs and letters from the period show that noble officers put an enormous premium on maintaining courtly standards of self-control while on campaign. Their reputation depended on a meticulously splendid appearance, unquestionable courage, perfect equanimity and absolute devotion to the service of the prince. From this point of view a training in dance or the ownership of a few extra pairs of silk stockings was not in the least decadent or hollowly ostentatious. It was integral to the identity of the aristocratic officer.

I would also like to suggest that these aristocratic practices were intimately related to the limits on war, as they were conceived of before 1789. These limits were quite real, even if we can hardly give full credence to observers like the French officer and moralist Vauvenargues, who wrote scornfully that 'war today is fought so humanely, and with so little profit that it can be compared to a series of tedious civil trials'.²⁷ That was hyperbole. But war was not yet 'absolute'. Major battles, it is true, saw dreadful carnage, with casualties ranging as high as a third of the combatants (at Poltava, for instance).²⁸ But major battles were rare: armies had a tendency to avoid them where possible, favouring campaigns of manoeuvres. And armies showed historically unusual restraint towards civilian populations. As late as the 1680s and 1690s, French armies invading present-day Belgium left behind an appalling reputation. But when the French returned in the first decades of the eighteenth century, they largely spared civilian populations, sometimes in return for large, up-front payments. At the time of the next French invasion in 1745, Belgian civilians largely went about their business unmolested.²⁹

This conduct is usually ascribed solely to such pragmatic factors as balance-of-power politics. But it was also quite clearly an expression of the aristocratic values of the court society. The reluctance of commanders to risk battle reflects not only pragmatic calculations, but also the need for absolute self-control characteristic of the courtly ideal—think again of the way Valmont describes his 'battle' against Madame de Tourvel. The same idea of self-control, linked to a strong aristocratic code of honour, demanded that respect be shown to civilian populations. As Carl Schmitt points out in *Der Nomos der Erde*, noble officers had a tendency to view war as a sort of personal duel on a grand scale, in which the adversaries recognized each other's honour and social standing.³⁰ Not only did war have its

²⁷ Quoted in É. G. Léonard, *L'armée et ses problèmes au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1958), 290.

²⁸ P. Englund, *The Battle of Poltava: the birth of the Russian Empire*, trans. P. Hale (London, 1992).

²⁹ H. van Houtte, *Les occupations étrangères en Belgique sous l'ancien régime*, 2 vols (Ghent, 1930), i. 135–7. See in general Bell, *The first total war*, 46.

³⁰ C. Schmitt, *Der Nomos der Erde im Völkerrecht des jus publicum Europaeum* (Cologne, 1950).

rules; its conduct could be seen, somewhat paradoxically, as a form of aristocratic civility.

The overall point here is that, in the old regime, war was still considered an essential and absolutely ordinary part of the social order. In keeping with this idea, most European states saw war as their principal business and spent well over half their budgets on military affairs—90 per cent for Prussia. In the eighteenth century, most European countries spent at least one year out of three actually fighting.³¹ And for these very reasons, the destructiveness of war had to be kept within strict limits.

Yet well before the French Revolution this vision of war had itself come under concerted attack. Was war in fact an ordinary part of the social order? Or was it an exceptional and exceptionally horrid state of affairs? Christian pacifists had made this argument for centuries. But in the decades around 1700, the idea of war as exceptional came to be tied to the idea that human societies, if properly constituted, could achieve a natural harmony in keeping with scientifically discernible laws, making war unnecessary. As Keith Michael Baker has argued, this idea, and the very concept of 'society' as an autonomous field of human existence, came into being in the late seventeenth century.³² We can see these ideas fusing with more traditional Christian teachings and inspiring a new sort of pacifism, above all in the work of Fénelon, the Catholic bishop and critic of Louis XIV whose 1699 novel *Telemachus* condemned military adventurism in scathing terms and sketched out utopian visions of societies that eschewed war altogether. Significantly, *Telemachus* became the single most popular European book of the early eighteenth century.

Following on this success, the eighteenth century saw a long stream of works that offered plans for perpetual peace. And their critique of war was increasingly integrated into broader works of social thought, especially those that held that all human societies evolved along a linear scale from conditions of savagery towards refinement, civilization and commerce. In this schema, which counted a large proportion of Enlightenment thinkers among its adherents, the development of commerce and civilization was in fact leading to the imminent extinction of war. In 1813, Benjamin Constant could sum up the now-conventional wisdom: 'We have reached the age of commerce, which must necessarily *replace* the age of war'. Any modern government that sought to wage wars of conquest was guilty of 'a crude and deadly anachronism'.³³

And yet, even as this conventional wisdom was spreading, it was eliciting a critique of its own. The genre of universal history could generate not just approval for civilized refinement, but also a longing for the alleged lost vitality of primitive

³¹ Rothenberg, *The art of warfare*, 12.

³² K. M. Baker, 'Enlightenment and the institution of society: notes for a conceptual history' in W. Melching and W. Velema (eds), *Main trends in cultural history* (Amsterdam, 1992), 95–120.

³³ B. Constant, *L'esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation dans leurs rapports avec la civilisation européenne* [1814] in *Oeuvres* (Paris, 1957), 983–1096, quoted at 993, 995. Unlike Enlightenment thinkers, Constant saw commerce less as a way to end international conflict than a way to continue it by other means.

societies—a vitality for which military prowess stood as the most obvious measure. Particularly in Germany, critics came on the scene who rejected linear schemes of evolution altogether in favour of an emphasis on the unique qualities and destiny of each particular people. Prominent among them was the statesman and philologist Wilhelm von Humboldt, who, rather than condemning war, praised it as the principal means by which societies could make historical progress. In a 1792 tract, he wrote: ‘War is one of the healthiest phenomena for the cultivation of the human race. It is unwillingly that I see it disappearing more and more from the scene. It is the admittedly fearful extreme, through which courage, labour and fortitude are tested and steeled’.³⁴ Humboldt went on to indulge in a frank military primitivism, which celebrated the hand-to-hand combat of ancient societies while condemning firearms and the kind of Prussian drill that turned soldiers into automata. He lamented that only in classical antiquity had the profession of war achieved its ‘highest beauty’ allowing for the full expression of physical and moral strength.

Obviously, this quick overview can hardly do justice to a deep and complex intellectual history. The principal point I want to make, though, is a simple one: while the visions of a Constant and a Humboldt might seem entirely opposed, in one vital sense they shared the same perspective. Both departed entirely from the aristocratic conception of war as an ordinary, unexceptional element of the social order. For both, war was something entirely extraordinary and exceptional—destructively so, for the one, dynamically so, indeed perhaps sublimely so, for the other. Neither saw it as compatible with any sort of social stability.

These new visions of warfare that developed in the eighteenth century were deeply subversive of the aristocratic order and also of absolute monarchy. Warfare, along with the court, provided aristocrats and kings with their most important theatre for the demonstration of the values that underpinned their social superiority and their right to rule. These men did not merely protect the kingdom and its Catholic faith. They brought it glory and honour. The king of France was a *roi de guerre*.³⁵ As Thomas Kaiser has argued, under the reign of Louis XV the French monarchy did begin hesitatingly to move away from this model of royal legitimization. Its publicists began celebrating the king’s virtues as a peacemaker, in accents not too far removed from those of Fénelon and his followers.³⁶ But France remained far

³⁴ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Ideen zu einem Versuch die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staates zu bestimmen* (1792), at <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/humboldt/wirksam/wirksam.htm>, chapter 5.

³⁵ The history of the concepts of glory and honour in early modern France is too vast a topic to consider here. On glory, see Morrissey, *Napoléon et l’héritage de la gloire*. On honour, see H. Drévillon and D. Venturino (eds), *Penser et vivre l’honneur à l’époque moderne* (Rennes, 2011). On the idea of the *roi de guerre*, see J. Cornette, *Le roi de guerre: Essai sur la souveraineté dans la France du Grand siècle* (Paris, 1993).

³⁶ T. E. Kaiser, ‘Louis le bien-aimé and the rhetoric of the royal body’ in S. E. Melzer and K. Norberg (eds), *From the royal to the republican body: incorporating the political in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France* (Berkeley, 1998), 131–61.

too often at war for such ideas to displace the centuries-old symbolic linkage between the king and his armies. Meanwhile the idea of warfare's regenerative capacity fed into the increasingly popular proposals at the end of the old regime to replace the professional, noble-led royal army with a new, national one commanded by men of talent and appropriate for a nation striving to regenerate itself.³⁷ These were proposals that ultimately threatened the French aristocracy's very *raison d'être*.³⁸

Nonetheless, before 1789 these debates had very little practical effect in France. While the French Government took important steps towards professionalizing the armed forces, it did so while reinforcing the hold of the nobility on officer ranks and the dominance of high aristocrats at the top of the military pyramid.³⁹ Hopes for perpetual peace did not stop the French monarchy from using the War of American Independence to take revenge on Britain, even at the cost of national bankruptcy. But then, in just two extraordinary years, everything would change.

III

During the years 1790–92, which of course saw the formal abolition of the nobility and then of the monarchy itself, there was an astonishing ferment of military thinking. It began in May 1790, when war seemed to be looming between France and Britain. Louis XVI asked the new, revolutionary National Assembly for funds to equip warships, but the assembly balked. First, its more radical members insisted that the sovereign right to declare war belonged to them, not an unelected monarch. Then, as the debate proceeded, certain figures, starting with Maximilien Robespierre, came to argue that France should renounce 'aggressive warfare' altogether.⁴⁰ Constantin-François Volney proposed the following measure: 'Resolved: that the National Assembly considers the entire human race as forming but a single and same *society*, whose object is the peace and happiness of each and all of its members'.⁴¹ A few days later, after a remarkable if confused debate in

³⁷ On these proposals see D. D. Bien, 'The army in the French Enlightenment: reform, reaction and revolution,' *Past and Present*, 85 (1979), 68–98; J. M. Smith, *The culture of merit: nobility, royal service and the making of absolute monarchy in France, 1600–1789* (Ann Arbor, 1996); esp. 227–61; R. Blaufarb, *The French army, 1750–1820: careers, talents, merit* (Manchester, 2002), esp. 12–81.

³⁸ On criticism of aristocracy at the end of the old regime see, of course, W. Doyle, *Aristocracy and its enemies in the age of revolution* (Oxford, 2009). See also the chapters by Clarisse Coulomb, Thomas E. Kaiser and Hamish Scott in this volume.

³⁹ See Blaufarb, *The French army*, 12–81.

⁴⁰ *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860, première série (1787–1799)*, ed. M. J. Mavidal and M. E. Laurent, 2nd edn, 82 vols (Paris, 1879–1913), xv. 517. The fullest analyses of the debate are in M. Belissa, *Fraternité universelle et intérêt national (1713–1795): Les cosmopolitiques du droit des gens* (Paris, 1998), 179–97, and J. J. Whiteman, *Reform, revolution and French global policy, 1778–1791* (Aldershot, 2003), 115–38.

⁴¹ *Archives parlementaires*, vol. XV, 576.

which the assembly struggled with the questions of who had the right to declare war and whether France should rethink its foreign policy goals and alliances, the deputies voted to renounce aggressive war for all time.⁴²

It was a vote that seems more than a little ironic in hindsight, given that less than two years later France declared war on Austria and Prussia. But during these two years the most radical advocates of war, mainly from the so-called Girondin faction, kept insisting that if France did have to fight, it would do so entirely in self-defence to protect itself against a conspiracy between enemy powers and counter-revolutionary *émigrés*. They even suggested that war would in fact bring about perpetual peace. The Girondin and *philosophe* Condorcet published a fantasy set in the future that described the coming war: French troops would need only to step across the frontier for the enslaved peoples of Europe to lay down their arms and embrace the French as liberators.⁴³ Soon after war started in 1792, General Charles-François Dumouriez told the National Convention: 'This war will be the last war'.⁴⁴

In this sense, even in its most aggressive moments, Revolutionary France was remaining loyal to the new language of peace. Yet in the same debates we can also see something very different taking shape, something closer to Humboldt's vision of war as a moral test. As early as June 1791, the guiding spirit of the Girondin faction, Madame Roland, was writing to a correspondent: 'It is a cruel thing to think, but it is becoming more clear every day: peace is taking us backwards. We will only be regenerated by blood. Our frivolous and corrupt morals can only be reformed by the rasp of adversity'.⁴⁵ In the following months, the theme sounded out again and again in Girondin writings and speeches, particularly those of the faction's leader, Jacques-Pierre Brissot. France was 'listless' and 'dessicated'. It was choked by 'poison'. It needed 'strong explosions' to purge itself. Only war would cleanse the country.⁴⁶

In their writings, before and during the war, the Girondins subscribed to exactly the sort of primitivism Humboldt had expressed. They poured scorn on the 'automata' who filled the ranks of the enemy armies and sneered at the use of firearms. They even went so far as to advocate the return of a weapon not seen on European battlefields for a century: the pike. In mid-1792, the French Government ordered smiths in frontier regions to put aside all other work in favour of

⁴² Ibid., 661–2.

⁴³ 'Extrait de l'histoire de la guerre de 1792,' *Chronique de Paris*, 15 January 1792, 59.

⁴⁴ *Archives parlementaires*, lii, 472.

⁴⁵ J.-M. Roland de La Platière, *Lettres de Madame Roland*, ed. C. Perroud, 2 vols (Paris, 1900–02), ii, 313. Madame Roland to Bancal, Paris, 25 June 1791.

⁴⁶ Jacques-Pierre Brissot, *Discours sur la question de savoir si le roi peut être jugé, prononcé à l'Assemblée des Amis de la Constitution dans la séance du 10 juillet 1791*, reprinted in A. Aulard (ed.), *La société des Jacobins: Recueil de documents*, 6 vols (Paris, 1889–97), ii, 608–26; *Second discours [sic] de J.P. Brissot, député* (Paris: Patriote français, 1791), 27; *Archives parlementaires*, xxxvi, 607.

pike-making.⁴⁷ Admittedly this order reflected fears of a shortage of muskets but within months the pike had taken on a life of its own: no less a figure than Lazare Carnot argued for its distribution to the entire population. In the Legislative Assembly, a deputy criticized Carnot for holding up the pike-bearing ancients as models. France's enemies, he observed sensibly enough, 'do not use slings and pikes, the weapons of savages, but firepower directed by scientific calculations'. But another deputy immediately shot back, to huge applause: 'If we have not been either Spartans, or Athenians, we should become them'.⁴⁸

The rise of these twin concepts—the 'war to end all war' and regenerative war—soon had an impact on military affairs. The first led directly to the conclusion that France's enemies could in no sense be considered honourable adversaries. They were, rather, criminals against whom any means were justified. Carl Schmitt has explicated this point very clearly. As he puts it, a war fought to abolish war is 'necessarily unusually intense and inhuman because, by transcending the limits of the political framework, it simultaneously degrades the enemy into moral and other categories and is forced to make of him a monster that must not only be defeated but utterly destroyed'.⁴⁹ Schmitt was thinking of the First World War, but the comment applies just as well to the revolutionary period. Consider, for instance, the thinking of Maximilien Robespierre, who had initially opposed the war. By 1793 he had come to a very different conclusion: 'Those who wage war against a people to block the progress of liberty . . . must be attacked by all, not merely as ordinary enemies, but as assassins and as rebel brigands'.⁵⁰ By 1794, Robespierre's ally Bertrand Barère was forthrightly calling for the 'extermination' of the entire British people, and the Jacobin Convention even ordered that no British prisoners would be taken alive. France's officers in the field did not generally enforce this order, and between 1792 and 1815 uniformed armies probably did not carry out more cold-blooded murders against each other than under the *ancien régime*.⁵¹ But the apocalyptic notion of the 'last war' is one factor lying behind the steady intensification of war during the period.

The concept of regenerative war had a strong effect as well. Consider above all the *levée en masse*, the declaration that all able-bodied men must fight for the

⁴⁷ J.-P. Bertaud (ed.), *Valmy: La démocratie en armes* (Paris, 1970), 103. In general on this: J. A. Lynn, 'French opinion and the military resurrection of the pike, 1792–1794', *Military Affairs*, 41 (1977), 1–7.

⁴⁸ *Archives parlementaires*, xlvii, 362. The exchange was between Laureau and Lecointre-Puyraveau.

⁴⁹ C. Schmitt, *The concept of the political*, ed. and trans. G. Schwab (New Brunswick, 1976), 36.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Belissa, *Fraternité universelle*, 365.

⁵¹ Bell, *Cult of the nation*, 98–101; S. Wahnich, *L'impossible citoyen: L'étranger dans le discours de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1997), 237–346; E. Pelzer, "'Il ne sera fait aucun prisonnier anglais ou hanovrien'": Zur Problematik der Kriegsgefangenen während der Revolutions- und Empirekriege (1792–1815) in R. Overmans (ed.), *In der Hand des Feindes: Kriegsgefangenschaft von der Antike bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Cologne, 1999), 189–210. The decree also applied to soldiers from Hanover, ruled by Britain's George III.

Republic.⁵² Historians have usually interpreted it as a quintessentially modern law, the forerunner of modern conscription, but it was nothing of the sort. It was, at least in its original conception, an expression of the same military primitivism expressed by the Girondins. The men who demanded it did not summon up images of lines of well-drilled musketeers. They spoke of swords and pikes and clubs, of heating sulphur to pour on enemy heads. They spoke of the nation rising up as one great, pike-bearing colossus.⁵³

Even after the Jacobins fell in 1794, the concepts of war to end war and regenerative war did not lose their force. They continued to define the meaning that war held for educated élites, in France and beyond, and to shape the actual conduct of warfare in Europe down to Waterloo. This continuity is particularly striking, given that with the proclamation of the First Empire in 1804 the Napoleonic regime explicitly sought to reconnect with the language and imagery of dynasticism and medieval chivalry. But these innovations were widely ridiculed at the time and could not disguise the more fundamental similarities between revolutionary and Napoleonic military culture.

Napoleon himself, needless to say, was hardly a serious advocate of perpetual peace. Nonetheless the point is again worth stressing: despite strenuous efforts, he never managed to establish with his principal enemies the relationship of honourable adversaries that had prevailed under the *ancien régime*. In practice, his treatment of enemy powers swung erratically between the maudlin embrace of 'brother sovereigns'—as with Tsar Alexander at Tilsit—and angry condemnations of 'criminal monsters'—as with the British after the breakdown of the Peace of Amiens in 1803. In an 1806 message to his Senate, he candidly acknowledged this breakdown in 'civilized' warfare while placing the blame squarely on the enemy: 'It has cost dearly us to return . . . to the principles that characterized the barbarism of the early ages of nations, but we have been constrained . . . to deploy against the common enemy the arms he has used against us'.⁵⁴ I would not go as far as Paul Schroeder and label Napoleon's policies themselves 'criminal'.⁵⁵ But clearly the language of criminality dominated international relations throughout the Napoleonic Wars and structured Napoleon's own captivity afterwards.

The concept of regenerative war underwent several inflections in the Napoleonic period as well. First, whereas previously regeneration had been seen as something that swept impersonally through all of society, under Napoleon it was increasingly tied to the work of specific agents: the armed forces or the commanding general

⁵² *Archives parlementaires*, lxxii, 674.

⁵³ For instance, A. Soboul, *Les soldats de l'an II* (Paris, 1959), 117.

⁵⁴ Napoleon to the French Senate, 21 November 1806, in *Correspondance de Napoléon Ier, publiée par ordre de l'empereur Napoléon III*, 20 vols (Paris, 1858–60), xiii, 680 (no. 11281).

⁵⁵ P. W. Schroeder, 'Napoleon's foreign policy: a criminal enterprise,' *Journal of Military History*, 54 (1990), 147–62.

himself. This shift began as early as 1797, when conservatives threatened to take power in France. In response the remnants of the Jacobin left called for the active intervention of the army. To quote one left-wing newspaper: 'The great deluge was necessary to purge the earth. We now need the armies to purify France'.⁵⁶ The so-called *coup d'état* of Fructidor duly followed. Over the next two years, the armies routinely portrayed themselves as the last bastion of republican purity, in contrast to the corruption and backsliding of the Directorial regime. Well before taking power in 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte was already portraying himself in copious written propaganda as the saviour of the Republic. After he took power, he routinely referred to himself as a 'regenerator'.

With this shift we see also the arrival of modern militarism on the European scene. As I would define it, militarism is predicated on the understanding of 'the military' as a sphere of society that is fully distinct from and opposed to the 'civilian' one—and morally superior.⁵⁷ Under the old regime, this distinction simply did not exist. True, common soldiers were often held to be social outsiders. But the aristocratic officer corps was wholly integrated into élite society. Indeed, aristocratic officers rarely spent more than three to four months a year at their posts. During the French Revolution, the Jacobins likewise resisted any separation between the military and society at large, through the cult of the nation in arms. But after 1794, as Rafe Blaufarb has shown, this cult gave way very rapidly to a new sort of military professionalism. Now officers as well as men were expected to spend the bulk of their time in uniform, in physically separate settings from civilian society.⁵⁸ Now officers identified themselves principally as officers, rather than as members of a particular social class. Their political loyalties lay mostly with the armed forces itself. Tellingly it is at precisely this time, the 1790s, that the opposition between the words 'military' and 'civilian' arose in the French and English languages, with the latter meaning a non-military person. Before the Revolution, the noun and adjective 'civilian'—*civil* in French—had not existed in this sense.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Quoted in W. Kruse, *Die Erfindung des modernen Militarismus: Krieg, Militär und bürgerliche Gesellschaft im politischen Diskurs der Französischen Revolution, 1789–1799* (Munich, 2003), 260.

⁵⁷ On militarism: C. Jansen, 'Die Militarisierung der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft im 19. Jahrhundert' in C. Jansen (ed.), *Der Bürger als Soldat: Die Militarisierung europäischer Gesellschaften im langen 19. Jahrhundert: ein internationaler Vergleich* (Essen, 2004). My perspective is closer to this than to older studies like Samuel E. Finer, *The man on horseback: the role of the military in politics*, 2nd edn (Boulder CO, 1988), or A. Vagts, *A history of militarism* (New York, 1959).

⁵⁸ Blaufarb, *The French army*.

⁵⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary* (<http://dictionary.oed.com>), s.v. 'civilian', and the *Trésor de la langue française* (<http://atilf.atilf.fr/tlf.htm>), s.v. 'civil'. The distinction was not unknown in Europe, but had previously mainly appeared in societies that relied on mercenary armies, such as the city-states of Renaissance Italy. Niccolò Machiavelli's preface to *L'arte della guerra* (1520) distinguishes between the *vita civile* and the *vita militare* (www.classicitaliani.it/machiav/mac22.htm), with the first roughly meaning 'the life of the city'. But, where Machiavelli's 1720 English translator rendered *civile* as 'civil,' a later eighteenth-century translator, explicitly trying for a more colloquial English, had more difficulty,

Secondly, understandings of regeneration through war came to focus more and more on the individual self. A striking thing about this period from the point of view of cultural history is how Europeans were beginning to take an interest in war as an individual, personal experience—indeed, with Clausewitz, as a psychological one. Thousands of people published first-person accounts of their adventures.⁶⁰ This was something quite new. There is virtually no equivalent in the Seven Years' War just forty years earlier. Obviously the explosion of memoirs is a complex phenomenon, which depended heavily on increases in literacy and the general expansion of print culture. But it also has a great deal to do with new understandings of the self, new ways of seeing it as a unique entity with a heightened sensitivity to its own inner voice.⁶¹ These new understandings had particularly important echoes in the cultural field of war for they allowed the rather abstract 'courage' and 'fortitude' praised by Humboldt to be reimagined as intensely personal qualities. Now, war was not simply the place courage was tested, but the place in which the self could express itself most fully. With this shift, I would add, we have moved fully from Valmont to Julien Sorel: from war as a theatre of aristocratic self-control to war as a theatre of Romantic self-expression.

As the most vivid example of this shift, consider the Saxon writer and soldier Theodor Körner. In 1813, at the age of 21, he gave up a promising career as a playwright to enrol in one of the *Freikorps* of volunteers forming in Prussia to fight Napoleon and was killed a few months later. Today he is largely forgotten, but his work was enormously popular in the nineteenth century and he remained an icon of German nationalism until 1945. The copious poetry he wrote in 1813 was very different from the bombast of older, more established literary patriots like Ernst Moritz Arndt. It was intensely personal, concerned with his innermost feelings. As one literary critic has put it, Körner seemed to take the war equally as a German crusade and as vehicle for self-realization.⁶² Much of his work treats war as a rather boyishly glorious adventure. But it also has a much darker side, which expresses a frankly erotic fascination with death—indeed a sensual longing for it, as in the lines 'honour is the wedding guest and the fatherland the bride. He

rendering the word variously as 'civil', 'common' or 'of a Citizen', or avoiding it altogether. N. Machiavelli, *The works of the famous Nicholas Machiavel, citizen and secretary of Florence* (London, 1720), 433; idem, *The works of Nicholas Machiavel, secretary of state of the Republic of Florence*, 4 vols (London, 1775), iv, 7.

⁶⁰ J. Tulard, *Nouvelle Bibliographie critique des mémoires sur l'époque napoléonienne écrits ou traduits en français* (Geneva, 1991) and helpful websites: <http://napoleonic-literature.com/AgeOfNapoleon/Memoirs.html> and www.napoleon-series.org/research/eyewitness/c_british.html.

⁶¹ D. Wahrman, *The making of the modern self: culture and identity in eighteenth-century England* (New Haven, 2005); also J. Goldstein, *The post-revolutionary self: politics and psyche in France, 1750–1850* (Cambridge MA, 2005), and the H-France forum on the book: <http://h-france.net/forum/h-franceforum.html>.

⁶² E. Weber, *Lyrik der Befreiungskriege (1812–1815: Gesellschaftspolitische Meinungs- und Willensbildung durch Literatur* (Stuttgart, 1991).

who lustfully embraces it has wedded death itself'.⁶³ In a letter to his father, Körner even spoke of battle as a *Todeshochzeit*—a death wedding. And in one of his most famous poems, he stated frankly that full happiness could only come with the complete immolation of the self in sacrificial death: 'Nur in dem Opfertod reift uns das Glück'.⁶⁴ It is a statement we might place in the mouth of Julien Sorel.

The most powerful example of war as self-expression, though, comes in a much more obvious place: in the person of Körner's great enemy and Julien Sorel's hero: Napoleon Bonaparte. It is perhaps the greatest of historical clichés to speak of Napoleon as an extraordinary individual, which is one reason why so many historians avoid the subject altogether. But I would like to take another look at it. We have to remember, first, that Napoleon himself worked very hard throughout his career to shape this image of himself as extraordinary. Thanks to his early literary ambitions, he was a brilliant melodramatic writer with a deeply literary sensibility: sometimes novelistic, sometimes more theatrical. Like characters out of the novels of the day, he was deeply conscious of his own originality, prone to constant self-questioning and constant marvelling at the turns of his fortune.⁶⁵ As he remarked famously in 1816 on Saint Helena, 'what a novel my life has been'.⁶⁶

For this reason, Napoleon himself is the single best illustration of the shift in the culture of war that I have been describing here—from war as an ordinary, unexceptional part of the social order, a theatre for the performance of aristocratic life, to war as the extraordinary, extreme experience that is either to be ended altogether by whatever means necessary or celebrated as a means of testing and steeling societies and individuals. In the old regime in the world of Valmont's careful manoeuvres, there was simply no place for a self-consciously 'extraordinary' military figure like Napoleon. Only with the end of the aristocratic order in France could a figure like him take shape: the extraordinary extreme personified. Not surprisingly then, under Napoleon, despite all his imperial and dynastic conceits and despite his strongly stated desire to lead a civilian government, the actual practice of war continued to radicalize, to tend closer and closer to the apocalyptic, absolute ideal.

With Napoleon's fall and exile, the victorious allies tried their best to squeeze 'absolute war' back into the Pandora's box from which it had escaped in 1792. But they failed. Their very treatment of Napoleon as a criminal and their attempt to impose a permanent peace on the continent in the shape of the Concert of Europe shows just how far they had internalized the new conceptions of war. By the time Clausewitz came to write *On War* in the 1820s, it was already almost impossible to see the old aristocratic codes as anything other than archaic and artificial obstacles to the supposedly 'natural' course of absolute warfare.

⁶³ K. T. Körner, 'Reiterlied' in *Leyer und Schwert* (1814) at <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/koerner/leier/leier.htm>.

⁶⁴ Letter quoted in J. J. Sheehan, *German history, 1770-1866* (Oxford, 1989), 384; Körner, 'Bundeslied vor dem Schlacht' in *Leyer und Schwert*.

Although I would not want to push the point too far, I would argue that in important ways the twin concepts of an end to war and regenerative war have continued to structure the way Western élites have understood warfare during the past two centuries. Among intellectuals the pacifist, liberal critique has remained so strong that, as the sociologist Hans Joas has written, few eminent social theorists have seen war as anything but an aberration, an almost inexplicable anachronism. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a long line of liberal thinkers continued to predict the coming end of war in strikingly similar terms and often in complete ignorance of their predecessors: from Richard Cobden in 1835 to Norman Angell in 1910 to John Mueller in 1989. The task of theorizing seriously about war has been left largely to the likes of Carl Schmitt, the unapologetic supporter of Hitler whose hatred of liberalism led him to formulate one of the keenest modern critiques of it.⁶⁷

Even in the 1990s and 2000s, in the United States there has been a wild shift from visions of the imminent end of war—the ‘end of history’, ‘retreat from Doomsday’, ‘democracies don’t fight each other’ and so forth—to the widespread claim (after 9/11) that the country was engaged in an apocalyptic struggle, testing and steeling the nation.⁶⁸ What these perspectives of course have in common is the vision of war as an unmasterable Other, as something that can never really be understood even by those who have gone through it. This idea lends war a dangerous mystique, even among its opponents. It gives rise to the sort of judgement expressed by William James in his famous essay on the moral equivalent of war: ‘The horrors make the fascination. War is the strong life; it is life *in extremis*’.⁶⁹ But, as I have tried to suggest in this chapter, such ideas are much less timeless than we might think. They are, to a very large extent, products of the Enlightenment and revolutionary era.

⁶⁵ See A. Jourdan, *Napoléon: héros, imperator, mécène* (Paris, 1998); W. Hanley, *The genesis of Napoleonic propaganda, 1796–1799* (New York, 2002) available only at www.gutenberg-e.org/haw01/; A. Martin, *Napoleon the novelist* (Cambridge, 2001).

⁶⁶ E. de Las Cases, *Le mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*, ed. G. Walter, 2 vols (Paris, 1956–7), i, 859.

⁶⁷ H. Joas, *War and modernity*, trans. R. Livingstone (Cambridge, 2003), 29–42; also M. Mann, ‘War and social theory: into battle with classes, nations and states’ in M. Shaw and C. Creighton (eds), *The sociology of war and peace* (Houndmills, 1987), 54–72.

⁶⁸ For example J. E. Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: the obsolescence of major war* (New York, 1989); idem, *The remnants of war* (Ithaca NY, 2004); F. Fukuyama, ‘The end of history?’ *The National Interest*, 16 (1989), 3–18; B. M. Russett, *Grasping the democratic peace: principles for a post-cold war world* (Princeton, 1993); M. G. Marshall and T. R. Gurr, *Peace and conflict 2005: a global survey of armed conflicts, self-determination movements, and democracy* (College Park MD, 2005); For the ‘apocalyptic’ vision: N. Podhoretz, ‘World War IV: how it started, what it means, and why we have to win,’ *Commentary*, September 2004 (www.commentarymagazine.com/podhoretz.htm); R. Cooper, ‘The new liberal imperialism,’ *The Observer*, 7 April 2002 (<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/worldview/story/0,11581,680095,00.html>); R. D. Kaplan, ‘The new evils of the 21st century’ in C. Hermann, H. K. Jacobson and A. S. Moffat (eds), *Violent conflict in the 21st century* (Chicago, 1999), 20; idem, ‘The dangers of peace’ in R. D. Kaplan, *The coming anarchy: shattering the dreams of the post Cold War* (New York, 2000).

⁶⁹ W. James, ‘The moral equivalent of war’ (1910) in L. Bramson and G. W. Goethals (eds), *War: studies from psychology, sociology, anthropology* (New York, 1964), 26.