

General Introduction

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Until relatively recently histories of the Napoleonic Wars were very often written from a French perspective, focusing primarily on the military campaigns conducted by Napoleon between 1803 and 1815 and on the coalitions of European states that were formed to repel him. The Wars were generally seen as Napoleon's attempt to overturn the existing diplomatic and political order and create a new world empire in his own image. Napoleon must, of course, shoulder much of the responsibility for these years of endless conflict and for the deaths of so many men and women, both soldiers and civilians, that it caused; no amount of revisionism can absolve him of that. Besides, he is undeniably the dominant figure of the era. But it is important, nevertheless, to draw a clear distinction between the history of the Napoleonic Wars and that of the Empire or of Napoleon's personal trajectory. In France, historians of the period routinely point to his outstanding military qualities, often referred to as his 'genius', while also admiring his administrative, educational and judicial reforms; sometimes, too, they share the regrets he expressed in conversations with Las Cases on Saint Helena once his imperial dream had died. And though on the Right, among conservatives and monarchists, there is a very different tradition, that of the so-called 'Black legend',¹ Napoleon's myth remains powerful with his legions of admirers.² In Britain and the United States, on the other hand – to say nothing of Spain, where his invading armies met with the fiercest resistance – responses to Napoleon have been

¹ Jean Tulard, *L'anti-Napoléon: La légende noire de l'Empereur* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013).

² See especially Sudhir Hazareesingh, *The Legend of Napoleon* (London: Granta Books, 2004); Christian Amalvi, *Les héros de l'histoire de France* (Toulouse: Privat, 2001); Annie Jourdan, *Mythes et légendes de Napoléon: Un destin d'exception entre rêve et réalité* (Toulouse: Privat, 2004); Émile Kern, *Napoléon: Deux cents ans de légende* (Paris: Éditions SOTECA, 2016); and Philip Dwyer, *Napoleon: Passion, Death and Resurrection, 1815–40* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

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more mixed, with many reviling the memory of the Emperor as a warmonger bent on self-aggrandisement with little regard to the cost, a man who callously threw away the lives of his men in pursuit of an overblown ambition. Even today, Napoleon can arouse the strongest of emotional responses among historians. Charles Esdaile, for one, admits to his ‘deep and abiding hostility’ to the figure of the Emperor, and to a ‘repugnance’ at the ‘myth-making’ that has surrounded him.³ Adam Zamoyski explains how from an early age he was exposed to ‘violently conflicting visions of Napoleon’ that amounted to ‘a crossfire of fantasy and prejudice’.⁴ When caught in such a crossfire, it is difficult to remain unaffected or to pretend to total objectivity.

But the Wars were not all about Napoleon, or, indeed, about France (whose ambitions and those of the Emperor are hard to distinguish). Others among the combatant nations had their war aims, too, which caused them to forge alliances, defy blockades and participate in military actions. Not all had the single aim of checking Napoleon’s progress. For Britain, France was a traditional foe with whom she had fought a succession of wars across the eighteenth century, wars in which colonial acquisitions and supremacy at sea were at least as important as the balance of power in continental Europe; and these concerns were not now suddenly put to one side. Russia, Austria and Prussia were more interested in securing their gains in Poland than they were in forming a buffer along the Rhine, while the Tsar also kept a wary eye on any British or French incursions into the Levant and sought to take advantage of the weakness of the Ottoman Empire to make territorial acquisitions in the Balkans and the Caucasus.⁵ Elsewhere in Europe, commercial interests and trading rivalries helped explain the willingness of kings and princes to commit themselves to fight in another coalition, whereas the Pope battled to maintain his temporal possessions and his spiritual authority in the face of Napoleon’s distrust and antagonism.⁶ And although the French had renounced wars to secure dynastic ambitions during the Revolution, other powers continued to fight wars for traditional purposes. The princes and electors of what is now Germany, for instance – some promoted to kingdoms by Napoleon in exchange for their loyalty – continued

3 Charles Esdaile, *The Wars of Napoleon* (2nd edition, Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), p. xvii.

4 Adam Zamoyski, *Napoleon: A Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), p. xiii.

5 Alexander Mikaberidze, *The Napoleonic Wars: A Global History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 410.

6 For a detailed examination of the struggle between Napoleon and Pius VII, see Ambrogio A. Caiani, *To Kidnap a Pope: Napoleon and Pius VII* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

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to scrap over territory and dynastic advantage, and were less inspired by nationalist ideology than nineteenth-century German writers liked to claim.⁷ Even the language used to describe the wars varied from state to state. What were called the ‘French Wars’ in the pages of the *Times* – a descriptor that neatly diverted all responsibility to those on the other side of the Channel – might be the Napoleonic Wars across much of the continent, or the Anti-Napoleonic Wars in Prussia and northern Germany. This is not purely a semantic question. Names mattered since they were a reflection of the interests and perceptions of each participating power. It has always been so. For Britain’s American colonists, the War of the Austrian Succession was King George’s War, and the Seven Years War the French and Indian War; closer to our own times, what in the United States is the Vietnam War is for the Vietnamese, understandably, the American War. Each nation has its own experience of war, its sense of geography and of moral outrage to convey.⁸

Historical writing on war has evolved hugely in recent decades as military historians are influenced by wider historiographical trends and respond to the concerns and values of today’s world. The influence of postmodernism, in particular, and of the ‘cultural turn’ has thrown doubt on the relevance of grand narratives and of the meanings ascribed to wars by their generals and political leaders. Students of gender and women’s history have redefined war in gendered terms, depicting the battlefield as a gendered space and suggesting how war helped to redraw gender roles in society at large. Wars leave long shadows, and some of the most innovative work on the legacy of war has been written by scholars of myths and of memory studies. War is now regularly studied through the lens of the social sciences, using ideas and perceptions gained through anthropology, psychology or cultural studies. The arts have been conscripted, too, to the cause, as new emphasis is placed on visual representations of war and their use as propaganda to influence both the troops, domestic opinion and enemy morale. And there has been a greater concern to study individual experience of war, the fears and aspirations of those involved, and the stories they lived to tell for posterity. Nowhere is this clearer than in the growing interest in the history of emotions, of pride and honour, fear and trauma, all of which play a central role in the soldier’s world. As defined by William Reddy, emotions have

⁷ Karen Hagemann, *Revisiting Prussia’s Wars against Napoleon: History, Culture and Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), esp. pp. 397–415.

⁸ For a Europe-wide discussion of the experience of these wars, see Ute Planert (ed.), *Napoleon’s Europe: European Politics in Global Perspective* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

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a critical role to play not only in social and cultural spheres, but in politics, too. This applies to the eighteenth century as much as to the world today. As Rob Boddice notes, ‘Reddy’s account of the transition in emotional economy in France, from Ancien Régime through revolution to empire, is the exemplary case study’.⁹ It is an approach that could be fruitfully developed with regard to the Napoleonic Wars.

Not everything, of course, has changed in historians’ approach to war. Some of the traditional topics of military history remain key to our understanding of the Napoleonic Wars, though the ways in which they are discussed have evolved hugely to take account of recent research and the influence of new disciplines like war studies. Diplomacy and strategy, tactics and battlefield operations remain – as they must remain – a central part of the study of warfare. Technological change and logistical innovation affect the ways in which war is conducted, though there is little to suggest that these were a major factor in the Napoleonic Wars. Strategy is generally accorded much greater importance. But what is strategy? It is a question to which military historians have devoted more and more attention, whether in the context of classical Greece or that of our own times. ‘One common contemporary definition’, writes Lawrence Freedman, ‘describes it as being about maintaining a balance between ends, ways and means; about identifying objectives; and about the resources and methods available for meeting such objectives’.¹⁰ This is not just about plotting what can be achieved through military action; it involves both internal and external policy and affects every aspect of the polity. It involves creating and sustaining a culture and necessitates political choices, not just a skilful reading of battles. ‘Strategy’, in Jeremy Black’s words, is ‘an overarching vision of what an organisation or individual wants to achieve, coupled with a set of objectives designed to make that possible’. It extends far beyond ‘the details of the plans by which goals are implemented by military means’.¹¹ In this sense, Napoleon, by combining the roles of political ruler and military leader, might seem uniquely well placed to mobilise the resources of France and the wider Empire in the pursuance of his military goals.

⁹ William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 124–7; Rob Boddice, ‘The History of Emotions’, in Sasha Handley, Rohan McWilliam and Lucy Noakes (eds.), *New Directions in Social and Cultural History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 45–64.

¹⁰ Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. xi.

¹¹ Jeremy Black, *Military Strategy: A Global History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), p. 271.

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Napoleon himself made few references to strategy; it was a neologism that was just coming into use towards the end of the Napoleonic era, and he was not comfortable using it. As a man of the eighteenth century, he preferred to talk of '*la grande tactique*', or to use the expression he had learned at military academy, '*l'art de la guerre*'.¹² Only on Saint Helena did he allow himself to mention strategy by name, and then he did so laconically: 'Strategy is the art of plans of campaign and tactics the art of battles'.¹³ Yet he enjoys a rare reputation as a supreme strategist, a reputation which he owes in no small measure to the praise bestowed on him by the Prussian Carl von Clausewitz, arguably the greatest modern theorist of war. On the battlefield he was considered, both by those around him and by subsequent generations, to be a general of the rarest quality, able to see beyond the immediate operational goal in pursuance of longer-term ambitions. In the 1880s and 1890s, when the French Republic was set on training a new generation of cadets at Saint-Cyr to face the threat of a German attack, the courses in tactics and military history make for interesting reading. Whereas the campaigns of the French Revolution were dismissed in a single lesson, another was devoted to the transformation of the Army of Italy by Bonaparte, before ten detailed lessons followed to discuss Napoleon's campaigns.¹⁴ He was famous for his precise planning, for his oversight of the field, his ability to move units of his army rapidly into new positions to face down the enemy. A successful commander, he believed, must always be prepared to attack the enemy and seize the initiative in battle, arguing that 'there are moments in war when no consideration must counterbalance the advantage of anticipating the enemy and attacking him first'. But though there is no doubt that he would actively seek battle, he was careful, wherever possible, to ensure that he had assembled more effective troops, better supplies, and superior resources before he committed his army to the field.¹⁵ There is a difference between aggression and foolhardiness, and for much of his career he succeeded in staying on the right side of that line.

But Napoleon was far from being the only notable strategist in the Napoleonic Wars; and after the success of his early campaigns he found his opponents more determined and better led. The sheer scale of his victory at Jena and the harsh

12 François Houdecek, 'Editorial', in the *Newsletter* of the Fondation Napoléon, No. 883, 9–15 March 2018; see also Thierry Lentz, *Napoléon: Dictionnaire historique* (Paris: Perrin, 2020), pp. 51–5.

13 Bruno Colson, *Napoleon on War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 85.

14 Alan Forrest, *Napoleon* (London: Quercus, 2011), p. 328.

15 Colson, *Napoleon on War*, p. 309.

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terms which he imposed on Prussia at Tilsit were a warning to all of Europe. For Prussia itself, defeat spelled the need for a dramatic revision of strategic aims, and inspired root-and-branch reform to an army that had been left largely unchanged since the time of Frederick the Great, allowing Prussia to recover from its humiliation and draw other powers into a series of coalitions against Napoleon. Even more vital, perhaps, was the impact on Alexander I of Russia, who became convinced – probably correctly – that peace with France would be impossible for as long as Napoleon remained in power. At Tilsit he had watched as Napoleon tried to push Russia eastward, out of Central Europe and the lands where Alexander was convinced Russia's strategic interest lay. From this time on, the Tsar would be in no mood for compromise, defying France over Poland and thwarting Napoleon's economic plans to defeat Britain through the Continental System. And Britain itself, dominant at sea after Trafalgar, opened up a new front against France in the Peninsula. After 1808 Napoleon's military dominance on land was increasingly threatened; indeed, his costly victory over the Archduke Charles at Wagram in 1809 was his last of any significance against the great European military powers. He was increasingly frustrated by the 'Spanish ulcer' to the west, while to the east, where he himself concentrated his armour, he found himself faced by determined opponents and accomplished strategists, men who were prepared to defend, often doggedly, against the French, and who went on to defeat him in the field: Wellington for Britain, the Archduke Charles for Austria, and, in Alexander's service, such prudent commanders as Barclay de Tolly and Mikhail Kutuzov. The quality of the armies he faced, especially during the ill-fated Russian Campaign in 1812 – surely his greatest strategic blunder – owed as much to the strategies devised by his adversaries as to his own mistakes.¹⁶ The balance of power across Europe had shifted.

The Napoleonic Wars were much more than struggles over territory and economic resources on the mainland of Europe. They were global wars, fought in Europe's colonies as much as on the continent itself. And they would leave their mark on countries across the globe, not least across the Atlantic, where Napoleonic officers migrated to extend their military careers when peace returned to Europe, and where much surplus weaponry would end up, sold off to the warring parties of revolutionary Central and Southern America.¹⁷ To

¹⁶ Dominic Lieven, *Russia against Napoleon: The Battle for Europe, 1807 to 1814* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), pp. 102–37.

¹⁷ Jean-Claude Lorblanchès, *Soldats de Napoléon aux Amériques* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012); also Rafe Blaufarb, 'Arms for Revolutions: Military Demobilization after the Napoleonic Wars and Latin American Independence', in Alan Forrest, Karen Hagemann and Michael Rowe (eds.), *War, Demobilization and Memory: The*

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a degree, too, they were ideological wars that emerged from the conflicts over religion, legitimacy and revolutionary ideology that characterised the 1790s. They were fought by mass armies, engaging millions of men over nearly a quarter of a century, which has allowed David Bell to talk of them as the first ‘total wars’, akin to the World Wars of the twentieth century.¹⁸ Finding such large numbers of soldiers, along with their horses, munitions and equipment, presented rulers with a massive logistical challenge. Faced with the success of France’s conscript armies, more and more states turned to some form of conscription to fill their ranks, though they seldom granted conscripts the full rights of citizenship that were integral to the French model. Scharnhorst’s reforms introduced conscription to Prussia in 1806, and Sweden followed in 1812, Norway in 1814. Even in countries that resisted the introduction of conscription, like Britain, the numbers of men required more than doubled over the period of the Wars, and though many young men did volunteer out of a sense of patriotic duty, others were recruited by the traditional methods of signing-on bounties and the press-gang, or by involuntary transfers from service in the militia.¹⁹ Many were volunteers in name only.

In some parts of Europe, the invading armies met with spontaneous violence, popular insurgencies characterised by guerrilla fighting and mass uprisings. Though they could find unity in the defence of their villages or mountain valleys, these movements were inspired by widely differing objectives. Some demanded political and social change, the replacement of one set of values by another, with radicals pitted against conservatives, agnostics and humanists against devout Catholics, or the colonised against the coloniser. A greater number were fundamentally conservative, defending traditional rights against threatened change or resisting military requisitions and conscription. They often had their roots in the smuggler-banditry so characteristic of the Mediterranean region.²⁰ But, whatever their origins, these struggles were about far more than short-term victory or the loss or gain of a slice of disputed territory. They produced leaders who were hailed as local heroes and who would be adopted as icons by nationalist movements across the nineteenth century, like Andreas Hofer, the Tyrolean innkeeper who led an

Legacy of War in the Era of Atlantic Revolutions (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 100–6.

18 David A. Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon’s Europe and the Birth of Warfare as we know it* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).

19 Kevin Linch, *Britain and Wellington’s Army: Recruitment, Society and Tradition, 1807–15* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 35–55.

20 Michael Broers, *Napoleon’s Other War: Bandits, Rebels and their Pursuers in the Age of Revolutions* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 77.

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insurgency against the French in 1810 and is even today considered a martyr in the cause of his country. In Spain, too, guerrilla leaders were accorded credit for leading a patriotic crusade against the invading armies, though their military impact was greatly exaggerated, aided in no small measure by the prints and paintings of Francisco Goya, most especially his highly propagandist series of etchings on *The Disasters of War*.²¹

The Napoleonic Wars spread suffering and death on a scale that can be compared with the First World War, though it was spread over a generation and seven coalitions rather than being concentrated into a four-year period. There are no accurate statistics for deaths in these wars: the best estimates suggest that during the Empire alone – between 1805 and 1815 – more than two million soldiers died, the majority from fevers and disease.²² The scale of these losses varied from state to state. Not all the protagonists would be involved throughout the entire period of the Wars; but for France and Britain in particular, the war effort would be largely unbroken, and the call for sacrifice unrelenting. And though the technology of war had barely changed since the campaigns of the eighteenth century, the numbers of men involved and the levels of violence used in battle – at Borodino, for instance, or at Waterloo – shocked contemporaries and left many thousands dead, wounded and scarred, often for the remainder of their lives. Most of the combatant nations turned to some form of conscription to fill their ranks, while others mobilised mass armies by national and patriotic propaganda, leading to the displacement of millions of people as soldiers, prisoners of war and refugees. Unlike the First World War, moreover, this was a conflict where little effort was made to spare civilians from the impact of violence and material destruction. Cities that lay in the paths of armies were attacked or placed under siege, homes were burned to the ground, village mayors might be taken hostage and peasants seized or executed if they fell into the hands of advancing armies. Across Europe and beyond, in the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean, the Levant and Egypt, armies earned a reputation for cruelty and ruthlessness in their treatment of civilians that was comparable with the most brutal confrontations before the twentieth century, such as the Thirty Years War

21 Peter Klein, 'The Disasters of a People's War: Goya's Image of the Peninsular War', in Alan Forrest, Étienne François and Karen Hagemann (eds.), *War Memories: The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in Modern European Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 340–65.

22 Thierry Lentz, *Napoléon en 100 Questions* (Paris: Tallandier, 2017), p. 162.

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in southern Germany²³ or the Crimean War along Russia's Black Sea coast.²⁴ Copenhagen was bombarded by the British to stop the Danish fleet falling into enemy hands, Moscow was burned on the instructions of the Russian government, while for the inhabitants of those cities that were besieged or fought over, like Hamburg and Leipzig, the Wars brought fear and trepidation as they fell victim to artillery fire, marauding soldiers, economic deprivation or the deadly fevers and diseases that came with the armies. Civilians were too often dismissed as the collateral damage of war.

Indeed, both across Europe and in the colonies, there were few aspects of life that escaped the ravages of war. Economies were sublimated to the needs of the military, as workshops turned to making uniforms and armaments, the free movement of people and goods was interrupted, governments borrowed wherever they could find lenders, and state debts accumulated to cover military expenditure. Merchants found their trade routes severed and their markets wiped out by enemy action, forcing many shipowners to lay up their vessels or turn to privateering if their businesses were to survive. Blockades and counter-blockades cut established trade routes and condemned once flourishing ports to economic stagnation, with some facing irrevocable decline. The aim of such measures was not only economic. Napoleon's Continental System was a political strategy, too: by destroying Britain's trade and mercantile wealth, and by spreading misery and unemployment in ports like Bristol and Liverpool, he hoped to alienate the population from the war against France and incite popular demands for peace. The blockade did not work out that way, of course, but it was not without consequences. In particular, it so threatened the Baltic trade, including the lucrative trade in timber, that Russia saw no choice but to tear up the Tilsit agreement and re-enter the war. Meanwhile, in France's colonies, ideas of human rights born of the French Revolution and rising slave discontent caused by the brutal conditions on the plantations led to open insurrection and to the loss of the most valuable of Europe's sugar islands, Saint-Domingue. Napoleon's concentration on European expansion, combined with a blindness to the issue of slavery, had repercussions across the globe, as French colonial losses mounted and Britain was left unchallenged as the dominant imperial power of the nineteenth century.²⁵ These were not just European wars; they

23 Peter H. Wilson, *Europe's Tragedy: A History of the Thirty Years War* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), pp. 779–821.

24 Mara Kozelsky, *Crimea in War and Transformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 175–97.

25 See the essays in Katherine B. Aaslestad and Johan Joor (eds.), *Revisiting Napoleon's Continental System: Local, Regional and European Experiences* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

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were world wars, too. And as historians have become more concerned with global issues and global comparisons, the colonial dimension of these wars has led to a flowering of new research, on the revolution in Saint-Domingue, on Napoleon's colonial policies, and on the birth of Haiti as the world's first independent black state. The slave leader of the insurrection, Toussaint L'Ouverture, would become, in the words of his most recent biographer, 'a universal hero' and 'an inspiration for our times'.²⁶

There have been other significant changes, too, as recent historiography has moved beyond the battlefield to consider broader social and cultural issues. Much of the inspiration for this has come from studies of the First World War, especially, perhaps, the work on soldiers' fears and emotions, their desires and traumas, and their expressions of religious faith, by such historians as Annette Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau in France²⁷ and John Horne in Dublin.²⁸ New work on the experience and memory of the Great War, on the contributions of imagery, representation and legacy, has done much to redraw the boundaries of military history, expanding it into a broader analysis of war and society and providing a template for those studying earlier conflicts. Of course, the same range of written sources is not always available for earlier periods, with literacy less widespread and communications and postal services less reliable; and there would be no photographic evidence before the Crimean War in the 1850s.²⁹ But by examining the writings of officers and, where they exist, of their men, historians have sought to recreate something of their experience in the face of battle, the daily grind of drill and forced marches, the routine boredom, and the moments of relaxation and companionship that were recalled with such affection in letters and memoirs. These have to be read with some caution, of course, as Philip Dwyer explains, but they do allow us to glimpse so many aspects of the soldier's lot: the highs and lows of campaigning, the effect of government propaganda, the desire for news from home, the quest for glory and honour, the fear of being wounded and the dread that military hospitals

26 Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Black Spartacus: The Epic Life of Toussaint Louverture* (London: Allen Lane, 2020), pp. 327, 359.

27 Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *1914–1918: Understanding the Great War* (London: Profile, 2002).

28 John Horne, 'End of a Paradigm? The Cultural History of the Great War', *Past and Present*, 242 (2019), 155–92.

29 Some of the earliest war photographs, from the Crimean War, are to be found in Sophie Gordon, *Shadows of War: Roger Fenton's Photographs of the Crimea, 1855* (London: Royal Collection Trust, 2017).