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# Introduction

The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars of 1792–1815 were amongst the longest and the most intense conflicts ever experienced in Europe: for a similar scale of destruction and brutality, one would have to look back to the Thirty Years War of 1618–48 and to the world wars of the twentieth century. The Napoleonic Wars of 1803–15 alone destroyed five million lives, which matches the eight to ten million slaughtered during the First World War, if the overall size of the European population is taken into account. The French Revolutionary Wars of 1792–1802 wasted a further two million lives. The intensity of the violence was such that *one fifth* of the 3,372 European battles fought between c.1490 and 1815 occurred between 1792 and 1815. The conflicts were also global in their reach: although not habitually given the name ‘world war’, they had truly worldwide repercussions which made a lasting mark across the earth.

The figure who casts his distinctive shadow across this period is Napoleon Bonaparte, adored and demonized both then and since in equal measure. His meteoric rise from minor nobility in Corsica, where he was born in 1769, to become the single most powerful ruler in Europe would not have been possible without the French Revolution of 1789. Trained at the military academy at Brienne, then at the *École Militaire* in Paris, he took a commission

in the artillery in 1785. From his Corsican background Napoleon carried a clannishness that led him to advance the interests of his family throughout his career—but only for so long as they served his own political power: while Napoleon could justly be accused of nepotism, his aspirations were not dynastic, but rather he aimed at satisfying his drive for power. He therefore removed family members from office when they challenged him or failed to meet his expectations. As a young man, he absorbed the classics, identifying strongly with Alexander the Great, as well as the enlightened ideas of the age, including eighteenth-century notions of patriotism and political reform. Bonaparte was also a seething knot of resentment and frustration, nourishing an impulse for violence which verged on the sadistic. He was an ‘outsider’ without connections in French society, disadvantages which drove him harder. His violent outbursts may have stemmed from his brutal upbringing by domineering parents and from a bitter competitiveness with his siblings. He could be charming in his relationships with individuals, but he brooked no opposition to his desires and ambitions, a characteristic that he later transferred into politics and diplomacy. Bonaparte was a master propagandist: as a general in the French revolutionary armies, he deftly crafted an image of himself as a military hero and genius. He was, above all, an opportunist (see Figure 1).

Historians have debated Napoleon’s policies during the wars: was he trying to integrate Europe, unifying it by reforming its social and political structures? Or was the Napoleonic Empire simply a system of conquest aimed only at the exploitation of Europe’s people and resources? The historian Paul Schroeder argues that there was an ideological vacuum at the heart of Napoleon’s domination of Europe: it was a criminal enterprise seeking power for its own sake, matched only by the Nazis: ‘Hitler did it for the sake of an unbelievably horrible ideal; Napoleon for no underlying purpose at all.’ The central problem in this interpretation was Napoleon himself: no matter how hard the other European powers tried to accommodate him, Napoleon simply did not—could not—accept



**1. David's painting shows that the heroic myth of Napoleon was already well formed by 1800. In reality, the First Consul crossed the mountains on a mule**

limits to his power, which explains why he was never able to stabilize his European empire and why the wars continued until its final destruction. While far from absolving Napoleon of blame, this book will seek to nuance such views.

The very scale of Napoleon's ambitions, it has been argued, distinguished the Napoleonic Wars from their eighteenth-century precursors. As the historian Charles Esdaile has argued, even the

leaders of the French Revolution set strategic limits to their expansionism. This is true, but just as Napoleon was a creature of the French Revolution, so the Napoleonic Wars of 1803–15 were rooted in the French Revolutionary Wars of 1792–1802. A ten-month peace separated the two conflicts and they shared many of the same causes and issues, so it is natural that historians should treat them as one, great overarching conflagration, the ‘French Wars’. The continuity across the period is given explicit recognition by the fact that, although there were in fact not two but seven separate wars, they are customarily counted by the successive alliances formed against the French, from the First Coalition in 1792 to the Seventh that finally destroyed Napoleon’s ambitions in 1815. Collectively, the wars spilled out across Europe, from Ireland to Russia and from Scandinavia to the Balkans, but, in their imperial reach, they also meshed with conflicts across the world, in the Middle East, India and South-East Asia, at points along the African coast, and in the Americas.

This book acknowledges some stark differences between the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, but it treats the ‘French Wars’ as a whole, since a full understanding of one is difficult without an awareness of the other. While accepting that aggressive French expansionism, whether French Revolutionary or Napoleonic, was the single most important reason for the agonizingly long protraction of the carnage, it argues that it is not the full explanation. The entire series of conflicts had causes that went far beyond any single factor, and which were beyond the control of any one ruler. Rather, it is argued here that, as French power surged across Europe from 1792, it worked on long-term tensions in international politics which also reached boiling point. The wars, in other words, were not just about French expansionism or Napoleon’s ambition, but represented a perfect storm in which a range of European crises came together.

One of the reasons the wars lasted for so long and the French were so hard to defeat was that France’s opponents could not or would

not focus all their military efforts on victory over the French: they were either distracted by other crises, or bent on exploiting the international meltdown in the pursuit of their own, habitual strategic goals. It follows from this that the French Wars were not an ideological conflict between the French Revolution and Napoleon on the one hand and the old regime powers of Europe on the other, but originated in the deep, structural problems in eighteenth-century international politics, while the belligerents were motivated primarily by such objectives as dynastic expansion and strategic security. The first three chapters seek to demonstrate all this, Chapter 1 by exploring the causes of the wars and Chapters 2 and 3 by narrating the course of the conflict between 1792 and 1815. Yet the denial of ideology as a primary cause of the conflict and its painful prolongation does not mean that it was unimportant in other ways. The warring nations mobilized their peoples with powerful rhetorical, symbolic, and material appeals to their loyalty, their commitment to the social and political order, and their religious beliefs. So if the French Wars were not truly ideological in their origins (although surely the inflammatory rhetoric on both sides did not help soothe matters), they did become ideological in the ways in which states tried to motivate their people. Chapters 4 and 7 explore these issues of ideology and reform: how the structures of the French revolutionary state managed to fuel France's war effort and how its opponents responded through reform and seeking ways of mobilizing their own publics in defence of the old order. These chapters sandwich in two others, 5 and 6, which describe the experience of war at the 'sharp end', for soldiers, sailors, and civilians: these views from the front line and at the grassroots act as a counter-balance to the first three chapters, which look at the wars very much from a strategic and diplomatic perspective. The book concludes by discussing the long-term impact of the war to show that we are still living with its legacy today.