The Lived Experience of the French Revolutionary Wars

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In recent years there has been a blossoming of interest in the history of the lived experience, of history seen from the perspective of ordinary citizens who had little agency in policy making. Revolutions, wars and the great moments of political history figure strongly among such studies, events that have traditionally been seen through the eyes of political and military leaders. But their opinions did not necessarily form popular understanding, and political speeches were often, as they were intended to be, normative and instructional. Revolutionary decrees laid down how people should behave, whom they should denounce, and what language they should use to respond to events. Heroism and civic worth were loudly praised, and the thanks of a grateful nation were bestowed on those whose conduct commanded special recognition.1 But what does this show? How far did it affect people’s behavior? In his 2006 book Living the French Revolution, Peter McPhee rightly questions how far we can trust such official discourse. “Rather than proceeding on the assumption that change initiated by revolutionary governments in Paris transformed daily life”, he writes, we should think of change as something more gradual, as “the result of a decade-long process of negotiation and confrontation between men and women in the provinces and distant governments in Paris”.2 Civic behavior could not be imposed by government diktat.

The principal focus of McPhee’s study was rural society, the world of villages and farmsteads where custom still ruled many aspects of human behavior and helped to define the agricultural year. Here people timed their activities by the sun or the church bells, not by the revolutionary calendar.3 And many aspects of communal life were little affected by the state, or the law. Smuggling salt, poaching for game and gleaning for firewood were established elements of the economy in many parts of rural France and the source of endless skirmishes between village communities and the state authorities, and anger over the imposition of new forest laws served to shape local ideas of liberty and oppression during the revolutionary years. Peasants rushed to capitalize on the ending of seigneurial authority and the sale of national lands, and a decade of rural anarchy ensued, with country people returning to their old habits in open defiance of authority. Hindered by topography and faced with a wall of

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1 See Bourdon, Recueil des actions héroïques et civiques des républicains français (5 vols, Paris, 1794).
2 McPhee, Living the French Revolution, 9.
3 Corbin, Les cloches de la terre, 98–154; on the usage of the revolutionary calendar, see Shaw, Time and the French Revolution, passim.
silence from the village community, the state proved itself incapable of mounting an effective response.\textsuperscript{4} Too often the government’s concerns – with feeding Paris or protecting the grain trade, with dechristianization, with purges and political terror – were not shared by local people, or ran in the face of local interests. Their day-to-day lives were focused elsewhere, and the Revolution as it was defined in Paris had little to offer them. In the countryside it is not hard to find, as Richard Cobb so tellingly did, examples of the indifference which he characterized as the natural reaction of those living on the fringes of the French Revolution, of the many, like Milan Kundera’s Lucie whom he so liked to quote, for whom the Revolution had little meaning. “What did Lucie know about those great wings of history? She could hardly have heard of them; she knew nothing of history; she lived under it, she did not want it, it was alien to her. She knew nothing of the great problems of the age. The problems she lived with were trivial and eternal”.\textsuperscript{5}

Such innocence would become well-nigh impossible once war was declared, and even more when it became the all-consuming priority of the state. War brought the state into the village as it sought to recruit, tax and requisition to service its armies. But how was the war understood? Again, the declarations of France’s political leaders on its scope and purpose must be read with a degree of circumspection, as their purpose was to persuade, not to reflect public opinion. In 1790, for instance, when the revolutionaries acknowledged that they must be able to defend their territory against foreign attack, and must therefore maintain some form of military force, they were explicit about the limited circumstances in which a revolutionary nation could make war. In the words of the Assembly’s decree, “the French nation renounces all wars made for the purpose of conquest”, and it specified that “it will never deploy its forces against the liberty of any people”.\textsuperscript{6} There would be no repeat, it implied, of the long series of eighteenth-century wars which had cost France so dearly in both material resources and human lives. The lives of their citizens were precious and should be preserved as far as was possible. Revolutionaries were not warmongers, and if they were forced into hostilities, they claimed, theirs would be a cause in which France’s soldiers could believe, a cause that reflected their values and their interests.

Within little more than two years, however, France was once again at war. The government presented this as a defensive war, a response to aggressive saber-rattling by the Austrians and Prussians; and in 1792 they could make a credible case that the patrie was indeed in danger, and that the forces of royalism and reaction were massing to destroy the Revolution. A national effort was required to protect the frontiers, and, in an era when the French people were sovereign, it would be for the young men of France to respond to the challenge. But as the months passed, the case for maintaining a state of military emergency became weaker, as the French succeeded in pushing back the enemy and fighting the war on foreign soil. What had started as a defensive war rapidly turned into a war of conquest, annexation and often brutal imperialism that lasted for the greater part of a quarter of a century, consuming an entire generation of young Frenchmen in the process.\textsuperscript{7} Any initial idealism soon wore thin, to the point where, under the Directory and the regimes that succeeded it, military service became less an opportunity to demonstrate one’s patriotism or commitment to the ideas of 1789, and more a rite of passage, an obligation imposed by the state. The enthusiasm that greeted the first call for volunteers in 1791 became a distant memory. For the young men who were called into uniform – first by regular levies, then by

\textsuperscript{4} Matteson, \textit{Forests in Revolutionary France}, 111–14.
\textsuperscript{5} Cobb, \textit{Reactions to the French Revolution}, vii.
\textsuperscript{6} Archives Parlementaires, 1\textsuperscript{ère} série (1789–1800), vol. 15, 661–62.
\textsuperscript{7} A recent, and not overly sympathetic, view of the French Revolution’s approach to war is to be found in Esdaile, \textit{The Wars of the French Revolution}.
annual conscriptions – their experience of revolution very quickly turned into an experience of war when, as soldiers, they forfeited many of the freedoms in whose name they fought.8

Once they were soldiers, incorporated into their units and battalions, the young were subject to intense propaganda about the war they were fighting and the duty they owed to the Revolution. But while they remained in civil society, growing up as teenage boys in rural communities, they were subject to the same pressures and influences as their peers, and in many parts of France that translated into an extreme reluctance to serve or even to leave their home community. Despite the rhetoric of deputies on mission and other public officials praising the patriotism of the young and underlining their commitment to the revolutionary cause, repeated military levies put an increasing strain on their loyalties and showed up the fault lines in public enthusiasm for the war. Across much of rural France – and most especially in regions of afforestation or mountainous terrain which provided cover to those fleeing the recruiting-sergeant – quotas were undersubscribed, while families preferred to hide their sons rather than see them leave for the military. Young men had an economic value at home, especially in regions of pasture or subsistence agriculture, and their removal from the community could have desperate consequences for the family budget. In some regions, moreover, a spirit of anti-revolution, or of royalist sympathies, further sapped loyalties and turned whole families against the state.9 Parts of the Midi, the West, Flanders and the southern Massif had persistently high rates of resistance, while the presence of borders or provincial frontiers provided welcome opportunities for escape. In some regions religious faith played a similar role, especially after the early years of the war, when pessimism and fatalism crept into the spirit of the people. In some Breton villages boys who drew a low number in the ballot and found themselves condemned to depart were accompanied to the end of the village by the entire community, singing hymns and praying for the soul of the departing. It was, in their eyes, a final farewell. Service in the armies was something to be dreaded, something from which you did not return. They saw it as a death sentence.10

Not all, of course, faced the prospect of military service in such a negative spirit or with such a strong prejudice against the Revolution. Such fears were mostly to be found in communities without a strong military tradition, many of them far removed from France’s eastern frontiers where people had long been accustomed to the regular criss-crossing of armies in times of war. And in France’s more revolutionary regions – not least in Paris and the great cities of the provinces – there were many whose commitment to the republic or to the Jacobin cause made them willing recruits, eager to offer their lives for the revolution. Of course, they were not left to form their opinions unaided. As soon as the war was declared they were subjected to persistent propaganda and to a stream of patriotic exhortation, by local authorities and popular societies as much as by central government. Addresses from clubs and popular societies focussed on three general themes: the universality of military service and the elimination of any injustice in calling the young of the nation to arms; the need to fight to protect the gains of the Revolution; and the liberation of the land, the threat that feudalism, seigneurial dues and tithes would return.11 Taken together, these presented a potent incentive to serve, and they were soon complemented by ideas of citizenship and of republican virtue that had wide appeal with the young. “In a republic”, Robespierre declared, “every citizen is born a soldier. The arduous profession of arms is not the lot of one class or a part of the citizen body”.12 Inequality was an affront to the very idea of citizenship. It was

8 For details of the successive recruitment measures adopted during the 1790s, see Forrest, Soldiers of the French Revolution, 58–88.
10 Waquet, ‘La société civile,’ 191.
11 Bertaud, La Révolution armée, 128.
also, in Robespierre’s eyes, an affront to republican notions of virtue which he held to be so
critical to reforming the mentalities and instincts of the people. Through virtue, he implied,
self-interest and egotism could be swept away, and the army’s very purpose transformed. No
longer would France’s soldiers be subjected to the tyrannical rule of officers motivated by the
lure of medals and the pursuit of their own interests: virtue – and here I follow the argument
proposed by Rafe Blaufarb – was to be understood as that “magnanimous devotion” to the
common good that rejected “stupid vanity” and instead “subsumed all private interests in the
general interest”.13 In return for their service and their sacrifice, they would have rights and
enjoy a status that would command respect in their communities. Within the army, their
officers would start their careers as simple soldiers, sharing their burdens and their
responsibilities. They would no longer be a caste apart.

It must be noted, though, that most of the claims that the army was new in kind, or
that the young were enthusiastic to join and to “rush to the frontiers” (in the language of the
time) to “save the republic” were made by politicians on their behalf. Recruitment involved
increasing degrees of compulsion, and teenage boys found themselves under peer pressures
of wildly different kinds – to defend their families and their communities, to demonstrate
heroism and military masculinity, to fulfil the expectations of young men to bear arms. But
until their turn came, they had no shared experience of war, and until the first casualties
returned from the front, often damaged physically or mentally and unable to resume their
place in civil society, most young men had little sense of what war would mean for each
succeeding generation. In any case, in France as in all the other warring nations, men joined
up for reasons unconnected with patriotism or revolutionary zeal.14 Some were dazzled by the
pomp of military uniforms or were lured into service by money or drink. Or they left home in
search of travel and adventure, convincing themselves that the army would provide the
escape route that they sought from the tedium of village life. Others were driven out by a lack
of opportunity in the village, by the aridity of the land or the need to earn their living
elsewhere. For such men, often with little education and few skills that they could transfer to
an urban environment, the army, now as at so many moments in the past, provided an
obvious outlet. For others again departure might be acrimonious, resulting from family
squabbles, quarrels with fathers or brothers, unemployment or petty crime. The army had
always held a certain appeal to the desperate and marginal in provincial society, and the
revolutionary army was no exception to the rule. Indeed, there is evidence that in some parts
of the country communities deliberately set out to fill their quotas with those on the
boundaries of village life, shepherds from high in the mountain pastures, or seasonal farm
workers caught up in the recruitment as they passed through.15 They, no more than Lucie,
could understand the great wings of history or appreciate the great issues of the day.

Once they had left their villages and joined their army units, the young soldiers were
subjected to regular briefings and propagandist speeches, in which the virtue of the cause in
which they were fighting was repeatedly impressed upon them. This was done in a wide
variety of ways, from the ideological pep talks delivered to the troops on the eve of battle to
the repeated political messages borne to the battalions by political commissars sent from the
Convention. During the Jacobin period, especially, the army became an ideological training
ground, and the political education of the troops was a major government priority. Their blue
uniforms were a reminder of their republican identity, in stark contrast to the white of the
Bourbons; radical and sans-culotte newspapers were distributed to the troops; revolutionary
songs were sung around the camp fires; plays on revolutionary themes were performed in
makeshift theaters in the army; and the soldiers, or at least their officers, were encouraged to

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14 James, Witnessing, 68–71.
15 Forrest, Conscripts and Deserters, 86–87.
join local Jacobin clubs in the frontier towns where they were billeted. In Lille, for instance, where we have a list of 442 members of the Jacobin Club, it is striking how many (especially among those first to join) were drawn from the military, whether officers, aides-de-camp, army administrators or military suppliers. In camps and barracks, pamphlets and wall posters urged the troops to embrace the revolution and its more radical ideas, the same ideas in whose name they were fighting foreign wars. Indeed, there is little doubt that the army was quite explicitly used as a training ground in citizenship, a welcome opportunity to mold the young soldiers into committed republicans before, potentially, returning them to serve their communities.

In the many festivals of 1793 and the Year II, moreover, soldiers played a key symbolic role: they were idealized for their heroism and for the sacrifices they had made, and played a prominent part on the parade ground or the city square alongside the municipal officers and civic representatives. This was nowhere more true than in the Festival of the Supreme Being, which, as Jean-Paul Bertaud reminds us, incorporated another cult, that of the martyrs of liberty, which had particular appeal in the armies. In several regiments, indeed, worship of the Supreme Being appears to have been taken up spontaneously by the men in the ranks, unlike in much of civil society where its imposition was met with widespread resistance. Once in the army, soldiers proved a fertile ground for revolutionary propaganda as they experienced the Revolution with a particular – perhaps even a unique – intensity. Men who might have remained apolitical in their towns and villages could, the army believed, be molded into revolutionary patriots.

In their responses to the enemy and their views of the countries they occupied, revolutionary soldiers did periodically express themselves in ways that suggested a deep commitment to the ideology of the revolution and a disdain for those who took up arms against it. The enemy were lackeys of tyrants and despots; only the French understood the meaning of liberty and only they were fighting to defend their rights and guarantee those of their fellow citizens. For some soldiers, that meant a great deal: it gave them confidence and pride in the cause for which they were fighting, and the comforting sense that they were on the side of progress in the face of reaction and backwardness. They remarked on it in their letters and in what they noted in their journals and diaries; and they wrote in politicized terms when they sent reports to political clubs or municipal councils back home. Joliclerc, a peasant boy from the Jura, was one such soldier: “either you will see me return bathed in glory”, he told his parents, “or you will have a son who is a worthy citizen of France who knows how to die for the defense of his country”. But it is noticeable that it was more commonly among officers, not the men in the ranks, that such views were expressed; they had the literary skills and the habit of writing, of course, but they were also in all probability more politicized, and they included some who had been chosen for promotion as much for their political loyalty as for their tactical merit. In the Jacobin period, indeed, some senior officers would appear to have been promoted on ideological grounds alone, sans-culotte generals and senior officers tasked with ensuring the political conformity of the troops. But these were relatively few and the temptation to make political appointments short-lived, as even the most rabid Jacobins came to recognize that an army needed the leadership of military professionals rather than political commissars. Lavalette, for instance, an ultra-radical sans-culotte who was promoted

16 Lille, Archives Municipales, 18.336, ‘Registre des membres de la Société Républicaine de Lille’, an II.
18 Bertaud, La Révolution armée, 210.
to the rank of brigadier-general in the Armée du Nord in the Year II, did not survive the purge of the Lille club and soon found himself the object of denunciation and prosecution.  

For some young soldiers, it was their experience in the army that drew them into politics, their political awareness sharpened by the politicized atmosphere they met with and the Jacobin deputies they encountered, men sent on mission from the Convention to ensure obedience and conformity from the military. In the Year II, the full trappings of the Terror came too, with military commissions sitting in the camps to hand down revolutionary justice, and death sentences dispensed to those suspected of a range of civil and military crimes including cowardice in the face of the enemy, indiscipline and political deviancy. Such justice was intended as political education, something to be witnessed at first hand. Fear was a deliberate weapon of the military as well as of the state, and death sentences could be passed on the apparent whim of senior officers eager to appease local anger or stamp out criminal behavior. Men might be executed, for instance, for stealing from farmyards or brutalizing local peasants if the political climate demanded it, or for moments of cowardice in the heat of battle. Soldiers had to watch as their comrades were shot in front of their units, their fate a warning to those who were fearful of mounting an attack when they were ordered to do so or were tempted to desert or to slink back from the front. There was something terribly random about the sentences handed out and witnessing executions could leave a deep scar on all present. Some of those lined up around the firing squad could not hide their feelings of sympathy for the condemned man. Commenting on the shooting of a deserter during the Italian campaign, one soldier showed his true feelings when he wrote: “We shot one of our comrades, and yet that saddened me greatly, for he had not done any harm, he had only deserted.”

In civil society the young soldier might have expected to survive the Revolution with little personal experience of Terror. Few villagers would have seen a guillotine or would have encountered anyone who was sentenced to death: for, according to Donald Greer’s estimates, seventy percent of executions were concentrated in just five départements (those serving Paris, Lyon and the heartlands of the Vendean insurrection), whereas there were six that escaped without a single execution, and a further thirty-one with ten or fewer. In the army, things were very different. Sharpshooters patrolled the rear of the units to cut off potential deserters, political commissars arrived from Paris to impose terrorist laws on the military, while guillotines were erected in the camps to carry out the solemn ritual of punishment, often after what were little more than show trials. Again, it was an educative process for the men, especially where their own commanders were put on trial for alleged treason. In the Year II the Armée du Nord alone lost three generals to the guillotine, among them Houchard, condemned on a charge of treason but in reality sacrificed to save the Committee of Public Safety. The deputies sent on mission to the armies claimed, no doubt with some justification, that the sight of a general being executed for treason left a deep mark on the minds of the troops. Reflecting on the execution of a former general on a guillotine rolled into the midst of their camp for the purpose, the two deputies on mission to the Armée des Pyrénées-orientales could barely contain themselves. “You should see how such examples give energy and confidence to the Republican soldiers”, they gloated in their report to the Convention; “one single cry –‘Long live the Republic, long live the Montagne!’ – could be  

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20 Lille: Archives Départementales Nord, L 10371, Tribunal Criminel, Dossier Lavalette; ‘Note du Général Lavalette, en réponse à la dénonciation du Bourdon de l'Oise’ (Lille: n.d.).


heard, uttered from twenty thousand throats!". The soldiers must be terrorized into doing their duty. They should be given no choice but to obey.

But with the passage of time, and as campaign followed campaign, the political imperative became fainter and more traditional values re-established themselves in the French battalions. Fewer and fewer soldiers wrote about their political beliefs or their deep commitment to the Revolution; increasingly they mentioned honor and courage, glory and the quest for victory; they talked of their pride in their units, the quality of their officers, the success of their tactics and strategy. The months of the Jacobin Republic had been in that sense exceptional through the sheer weight of propaganda and the extent of politicization.

But, as Ilya Berkovich has shown, the difference can be exaggerated, since all eighteenth-century armies were routinely subjected to propaganda about their own regime and others, and soldiers were always expected to conform. All experienced political ceremonial, all took part in the church parades and banner consecrations that were a constant reminder of the regime which they were duty-bound to uphold. And motivation could come in many forms. "Why is it taken for granted", he asks rhetorically, "that showering soldiers with political newspapers motivated them more than a gill of rum handed out in honour of the king’s birthday or a public address from their commander-in-chief?". Why, indeed, did other armies fight with the same passion and motivation as the French without enjoying the sacred rights of citizenship? It was surely their experience as soldiers, as part of a body of men on whose skills and courage their own lives depended, that helped to forge them, more, perhaps, than any political messages from their government. And with the passage of time it was that collective experience, of soldiers increasingly hardened by war, that came to define them, just as little by little the army came to be their family and their home. Comradeship, a sense of obligation to one’s peers, became as central to the worldview of French soldiers as those of the armies against whom they engaged. These were men caught in the same moral quandaries as themselves, the men alongside whom they trained and fought, marched and foraged, were wounded and died. They were the men on whose skill and self-sacrifice they were dependent for life itself. Army life was simply different; it brought experiences that had no counterpart in civil society.

Many of these experiences were born of fear and danger with little parallel in everyday life: the ever-present fear of death, of course, of answering orders to attack enemy lines or throw oneself into the jaws of enemy cannon; the fear of one’s own side’s military justice, should one be accused of military crimes of treason or cowardice; the fear of shame and humiliation in front of one’s own comrades. These fears could only worsen after the first experience of battle, when a soldier had seen others felled by bullets of shellfire, had stumbled over the dead bodies of his friends, or had stood by as a comrade was horribly mutilated by his side. The cries of the dead and dying, the stench of the battlefield, the sight of naked corpses piled high in the aftermath of battle, these were images that would live with many soldiers until the end of their days. Yet in their letters and in the memoirs so many felt compelled to write after the war was over, it was less death they feared; death came swiftly and would bring their sufferings to a close. They were more likely to express their fear of injury, their dread of spending weeks in military hospitals, sick and incapacitated, or of emerging from the army disabled, deprived of mobility, or suffering from some chronic illnesses that would leave them unable to work and condemned to a life of misery and helplessness.

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25 Hughes, Forging Napoleon’s Grande Armée, 51–78.
26 Lynn, Bayonets of the Republic, 97–118.
27 Berkovich, Motivation in War, 35.
their time and left alone and abandoned, without any further role in rural society. They knew only too well what crippling injuries would bring, just as they feared being admitted to hospitals where fevers were rampant and killed many times the number who died on the battlefield.29 Others returned mentally scarred, deprived of their wits or their memory. In an age before medical science had identified conditions such as shell-shock or trauma, French soldiers still knew about nostalgie, an illness that drained men of their strength and willingness to live, a form of home-sickness so grave that it led men to waste away or take their own lives.30 They knew, too, about former servicemen who, once back in their homes, found themselves scorned as village idiots or condemned to languish in the miserable institutions that in Restoration France passed for mental hospitals. As they knew only too well, experience of war did not necessarily end with demobilization.

But, of course, not all their memories were of endurance or suffering. Much of their experience was of the routines of military life: basic training, drills, long days spent marching from town to town, months of inaction while they waited for orders, waited for something to happen. The Revolutionary Wars were no more exciting for being revolutionary; indeed, one sometimes has the impression that the dominant emotion soldiers felt was neither fear nor elation, but – as in other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century armies – dull, stultifying boredom.31 War brought moments of pleasure, too, moments that they would remember and continue to cherish. They looked back fondly on comfortable billets and home-cooked meals, on acts of kindness from village women, and on their occasional sexual adventures. In their writings, comradeship figures strongly, and memoir after memoir recalls a soldier alongside whom the writer had fought at Austerlitz or a close friend who had died an agonizing death in a military hospital at Smolensk. Some soldiers stayed together for years, serving in the same units for a succession of campaign seasons, sharing the same fears and triumphs, comforting each other through moments of panic and depression. Comrades were a source of reassurance, their company bringing cherished interludes in the war, moments of laughter and release. In their letters home soldiers talked of the sadness they felt when longstanding friends were killed or went missing in action, just as they noted their pleasure when their unit crossed with another from their province or department, from neighboring towns and villages which they all thought of as home. A drink together at the other end of Europe, memories of people and places from their past, even the familiar twang of a local accent, these were among the small pleasures enjoyed by men condemned to spend months, and sometimes years, in uniform, uncertain whether they would ever see their homes and families again.32

Not all, of course, saw their absence from France as a burden. They were able to travel and to enjoy at least some of the enjoyment of the modern tourist, and some clearly appreciated this. Most French soldiers came from rural areas, where geographical mobility, just like social mobility, was severely limited in the eighteenth century, with peasants barely moving from their village or travelling farther than the nearest market town. Whether they liked it or not, the army opened new doors and offered wider perspectives. Soldiers’ letters talk of their astonishment at seeing Paris for the first time, their wonderment at the sight of a great palace or cathedral in some foreign land, their pride at visiting the capital cities of great European countries. For those from rural villages, farming has a special attraction and they often commented on how others lived: boys from Brittany and the north of France encountered for the first time the wine-growing cultures of Alsace or the Mediterranean, young men who knew only subsistence farming marveled at the great wheat-growing plains of German Central Europe, while goatherds from the Massif Central or the foothills of the

30 Dodman, What Nostalgia Was, 122.
31 Maeland and Brunstad, Enduring Military Boredom, 10–14.
32 Forrest, Napoleon’s Men, 135–38.
Pyrenees encountered rich pasturelands dotted with cows and horses. For a generation raised in a France without religion, moreover, the sight of a village church on a Sunday in the Rhineland aroused a rich medley of emotions.\textsuperscript{33} Foreignness did not automatically generate feelings of alienation or hostility, and foreign landscapes could seem reassuringly familiar.

Soldiers did not react to such things collectively, but as individuals with individual consciences. Civilians might be protected or abused; women and children saved from the wrath of the troops when a siege was finally raised, or – as in the Vendée in 1794 or later in the Peninsula – despised as counterrevolutionaries and rebels or raped and butchered in a collective orgy of revenge. In Andalusia, the intervention of women in acts of violence and sexual disfiguration drove the French to new paroxysms of anger and hatred.\textsuperscript{34} In the same way, men reacted in very differently to the foreign cultures they encountered and the people they met on their travels. For some, like Charles François, a peasant boy from a small village in Picardy, life in the army revealed a world of which he could not possibly have dreamt, a world of exotic sights and smells, of literacy, and of recurrent danger.\textsuperscript{35} He enlisted in 1792 as a teenager and first saw action some months later at Valmy. But this was only the start of an exceptional adventure, serving in Italy, Holland and Germany in the 1790s, then in virtually every one of Napoleon’s campaigns. I shall let Joseph Clarke and John Horne take up his remarkable story, which they take as symptomatic of the pleasures of war: “He sailed to Egypt in 1798, where, like many later visitors, he carved his name on one of the pyramids. Taken prisoner in 1801, he was dispatched to Damascus, where, having already mastered Arabic, he spent the next two years in service with the governor of Adrianople, travelling to Baghdad and Jerusalem, Athens and Constantinople along the way”. After returning home, he resumed his service and campaigned across Europe for another decade, surviving battles from Ulm and Austerlitz to Friedland; he was in Madrid for the Dos de Mayo in 1808, and entered Moscow with the Grande Armée in 1812. “Nearly three years later, in June 1815, he fought his final battle, at Ligny, and then returned to France to compile the twenty cahiers of campaign notes, which, quite remarkably, he had managed to maintain over a lifetime at war”.\textsuperscript{36}

His story is exceptional, of course, though hardly unique. When French soldiers were finally disbanded at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, their number included men who had volunteered in 1791 or 1792 and had spent their lives in uniform. And when the Wars were at last over, after Waterloo, it would be interesting to discover how many French soldiers did not return with the army, preferring to spend the rest of their lives with their new-found wives and families in Germany, Poland, or elsewhere across Europe. Love as well as hatred was a product of wartime experience, and Europe emerged as a more heteroclite society than before the war. Mayors and local officials across Europe grappled with problems of nationality and residency rights: should they be allowed to stay, or should they be forcibly returned to France?\textsuperscript{37} And what of the many children born to women across Europe after village balls and one-night stands with soldiers as they passed through?\textsuperscript{38} In an age when nationalism was about to become such a trenchant force, military service did not necessarily reinforce national prejudices or distrust of the other, though, of course, for many it did. Memories of ill treatment at the enemy’s hands or of acts of cruelty and callousness lived long into the nineteenth century. But war service could also broaden minds and perspectives, increasing soldiers’ awareness of a world beyond their village and, in many cases, beyond their country,

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\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 162–63.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Lafon, L’Andalousie et Napoléon, 104.
\item \textsuperscript{35} See François, Journal du capitaine François, passim.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Clarke and Horne, ‘Introduction’. In Militarized Cultural Encounters, 1–2.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Forrest and Middell, Routledge Companion, 191–206.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Girault, Mes campagnes, 97–98.
\end{itemize}
too. It is surely unsurprising that, following their demobilization and return to France, veterans of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars – like those of most other wars – should have looked back on these years with pride, or to have seen them as the most exciting and memorable of their lives. They also felt that they had lived through something special, something out of the ordinary, and when they went on to write down their recollections or recount them in memoirs, they did so with the realization that they had been, in Philip Dwyer’s words, “participants in the historical process”.39

References


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The French Revolution (French: Révolution française) was a period of far-reaching social and political upheaval in France that lasted from 1789 until 1799, and was partially carried forward by the Revolution overthrowing the monarchy, establishing a republic, experiencing violent periods of political turmoil, and finally culminating in a dictatorship under Napoleon that rapidly brought many of its principles to Western Europe and beyond. Inspired by liberal and radical ideas, the Revolution profoundly altered the course of modern history, triggering the global decline of absolute monarchies while replacing them with republics and liberal democracies. Through the Revolutionary Wars, it unleashed a wave of global conflicts that extended from the Caribbean to the Middle East. The French Revolutionary Wars (French: Guerres Révolutionnaires Françaises) were a series of sweeping military conflicts lasting from 1792 until 1802 and resulting from the French Revolution. They pitted France against Great Britain, Austria, Prussia, Russia and several other monarchies. They are divided in two periods: the War of the First Coalition (1792–97) and the War of the Second Coalition (1798–1802). Initially confined to Europe, the fighting gradually assumed a global dimension. After a