The Soldiers' Experience of War

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Introduction: Representations of the Soldierly Experience

In 1803 an apprentice glove maker, Johann Christoph Pickert, was conscripted into the Prussian army. He would spend some twenty years in the military. In that time his regiment participated in some of the most significant battles of the Napoleonic Wars, including the engagements at Jena and Auerstedt. Following the Prussian defeat, Pickert was captured and transported to France as a prisoner of war. There he performed forced labour on a variety of construction projects, as well as working for local people. He was finally released at the end of 1808 and returned home to Haldensleben near Magdeburg. He agreed to act as a substitute in the Westphalian army for the son of a rich farmer in return for payment in cash and kind, but eventually rejoined the Prussian army and fought in the Wars of Liberation between 1813 and 1815. After the wars he joined the 7th invalid company, where he wrote his memoirs.

Pickert's narrative exemplifies some of the key aspects of the lives of Napoleonic-era soldiers - conscription, military discipline, combat and captivity. At the heart of the narrative is the soldier's body, the hardships and deprivations of campaigning, capture and sickness; the joy of plentiful supplies, of a friendly welcome and a good billet. Although Pickert describes his experiences in great detail, his focus is always on the proximate and immediate, whilst the wider strategic and political context is referred to only briefly. Indeed, he was self-deprecating about his abilities as a writer and commented, perhaps sarcastically, that as a soldier from the rank and file he could not pronounce on the war as well as those who read

about it in the newspapers as they sat by the fire with a full glass of wine. [1]

Pickert's narrative was just one of a flood of autobiographical accounts in the form of published letters, diaries and memoirs that appeared in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. They fed a growing readership keen to learn about the realities of war. Rising literacy rates in the eighteenth century meant that more soldiers were able to express their experiences in writing, whilst literary developments such as the growing popularity of the novel and the travelogue and the rise of Sentimentalism and Romanticism provided readily-available narrative models. But it was their officers, overwhelmingly drawn from the educated nobility and middle classes, who were most prolific. Even if private soldiers were able to write, most lacked the range of literary expression available to officers; their writings range from what are little more than *carnets de route,* lists of stopping points on campaign, through dry operational accounts to detailed battle narratives. The letters and diaries of officers were also more likely to survive, and were often published posthumously by their descendants. The geographical spread is uneven, too, since variations in European literacy rates meant that there were many more ego-documents of British, French and German soldiers than there were of Polish, Russian or Spanish troops.

Within these limits, however, letters, diaries and memoirs provide a crucial window into the soldierly experience during the Napoleonic era. They speak of the process of enlistment or conscription, the physical hardships of campaigning, the threat of military discipline, the experience of combat, the fear of crippling wounds, sickness and disease, and encounters with foreign places, peoples and cultures. Whilst they dwell on the horrors of war represented by torn bodies and devastated communities, they also speak of its pleasures, the chance for enrichment, career advancement, adventure, travel and encounters with the opposite sex.

This chapter explores these dimensions of the soldierly experience. Much of the debate

[1] Johann Christoph Pickert, *Die Lebensgeschichte des Johann Christoph Pickert* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2006), 5.

on the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period has focused on its significance as a turning point, as a crucible for the modern world. It has also been argued that the period represents a break from the limited wars of the eighteenth century, a period when complex battlefield manoeuvres and a pan-European, aristocratic military culture gave way to nationalism, the demonization of the enemy, unrestrained violence and 'total war', foreshadowing the even more destructive conflicts of the twentieth century.[2]

Undoubtedly, the forces unleashed by the French Revolution and the generation of warfare that followed would have a transformative impact on Europe and the wider world.[3] But not everything changed. Older, more traditional understandings of soldiering lived on; and however much belligerent states sought to mobilize patriotism and nationalism, the composition of Napoleonic armies continued to be very heterogeneous. On the individual level, many of the soldiers' laments and joys, encapsulated in the physical and sensory experiences detailed by Pickert, would have been very recognizable to soldiers of earlier conflicts. Similarly, brutal violence and demonizing rhetoric could co-exist with more traditional patterns of military conduct.

Recruitment and Enlistment

The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars witnessed unprecedented military mobilization across Europe. Armies increased in size and huge numbers of young men were conscripted. An estimated 2 million Frenchmen were conscripted between 1799 and 1814, and even in

[2] David Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It* (London: Penguin, 2007).

[3] Peter Fritzche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), passim. See also Ernst Wolfgang Becker, 'Zeiterfahrungen zwischen Revolution und Krieg. Zum Wandel des Zeitbewußtseins in der napoleonischen Ära', in Nikolaus Buschmann and Horst Carl (eds), *Die Erfahrung des Krieges. Erfahrungensgeschichtliche Perspektiven von der Französischen Revolution bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2001), 67-96.

Britain, which traditionally had a small, volunteer army, it is estimated that some 1 in 5 men were in uniform of some sort during the conflict. Across Continental Europe, the increased demand for manpower led to the introduction of tighter conscription laws. These were complented by state-led attempts to raise the status of the soldier and instill a sense of patriotism and nationalism. Whereas in earlier conflicts only senior officers had been awarded medals, during the Napoleonic Wars, decorations such as the Legion of Honour, the Iron Cross and the Waterloo Medal were open to all ranks. The wars were also accompanied by a flourishing patriotic literature in the form of pamphlets, newspapers, songs, poems and caricatures designed to promote state, dynastic and national loyalties, whilst the enemy was routinely demonized as barbaric, uncivilized or effete.

Much of this literature played on national stereotypes that had existed since at least the early eighteenth century, if not before. Although popular attitudes towards the military might have been slow to change, from at least the time of the Seven Years War a literature emerged that sought to honour military service and sacrifice. To this the French Revolution added the language of citizenship and glorified the figure of the citizen-soldier defending *la patrie*. The sweeping success of the Revolutionary armies in the 1790s encouraged military reformers in the absolute monarchies of Europe to press for changes in their militaries in order to face the French threat. Figures such as Scharnhorst in Prussia and Archduke Johann in Austria advocated the creation of militia forces, or *Landwehr*, in order to foster a sense of patriotism.[4]

The extent to which the military reformers succeeded is debatable. There is no doubt that patriotic sentiment played a role for some. Francisco Guervos had paid for a substitute when conscripted into the Spanish army in 1807, but he volunteered following the uprising against the French in 1808. Writing to his parents in 1809 he stated that he 'desired only to sacrifice

[4] Heinz Stübig, *Scharnhorst: Die Reform des preußischen Heeres* (Göttingen: Muster-Schmidt Verlag, 1988) and Ernst Zehetbauer, *Landwehr gegen Napoleon. Österreichs erste Miliz under der Nationalkrieg von 1809* (Vienna: Öbv & hpt, 1999).

my peace and quiet, my interests, and what is more my life, as any man must who loves his country and freedom'.[5] The narratives of German volunteers, often from the educated middling classes, also point to a desire to liberate the German Fatherland from French oppression. Some soldier-authors contributed directly to these ideas, such as the soldier-poet Theodor von Körner who wrote that 'happiness lies only in sacrificial death'.[6] Körner got his wish, dying in a skirmish with the French in 1813, and was celebrated as a warrior hero, a paragon of German masculinity.[7] Guervos' and Körner's patriotism was inflected with religious feeling, something largely absent from French narratives, which emphasized the importance of republicanism and patriotism in motivating soldiers in the 1790s.[8]

The extent to which these sentiments endured is questionable, however. By the 1800s, French soldiers' letters were less likely to refer to patriotism, whilst some German volunteers were often disillusioned by the realities of military life and the seemingly less honourable motives of some their comrades. In fact, the response to calls for a national uprising in Germany in 1813 varied by state and region. In the southern German states it found little resonance and was disparaged by some as 'Prussian *Schnapspatriotismus*'.[9] Similarly, in Spain Guervos was critical of the Catalan *sometents*, describing them as little more than 'gangs of thieves'. Even the supposedly patriotic guerrilla bands proved reluctant to fight outside their immediate home area.[10]

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[5] Ronald Fraser, *Napoleon's Cursed War: Spanish Popular Resistance in the Peninsular War, 1808-1814* (London: Verso, 2008), 137.

[6] Cited in George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), p. 70.

[7] Karen Hagemann, 'German Heroes: The Cult of the Death for the Fatherland in Nineteenth-Century Germany', in Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann and Josh Tosh (eds), *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 116.

[8] Alan Forrest, *Napoleon's Men: The Soldiers of the Revolution and Empire* (London: Hambledon and London, 2002), 79-104.

[9] See Ute Planert, *Mythos von Befreiungskriege. Frankreichs Kriege und der deutsche Süden: Alltag – Wahrnehmung – Deutung, 1792-1841* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2007).

[10] *Sometents* were a village home guard. See Fraser, *Napoleon's Cursed War*, 300.

Moreover, memoirs, diaries and letters also suggest that traditional reasons for enlistment continued to play a significant role. For officers, career advancement, a sense of aristocratic honour and duty and familial traditions of military service were serious considerations. In the case of Britain, Catriona Kennedy has pointed to the role ideas of masculine independence played in a gentleman's decision to enlist.[11] Some acquired a taste for military life after serving in a militia unit and, as armies expanded and casualties increased, there were more openings for officers. The career of Ignaz Berndt provides an example of this. Berndt had worked as a tutor in the aristocratic household of Prince Lobkowitz, but then served as an officer in the Austrian *Landwehr* in 1809. When his unit was disbanded after Austria's defeat, he responded by enlisting in the Reuss Plauen regiment. 'In this way I believed that my future, which I had not secured through my education as a tutor, was to be secured as a captain in Imperial service'.[12]

Napoleon's redrawing of the political boundaries of Central Europe meant that many serving officers faced a choice between retiring to their estates, finding a different career, or swallowing their pride and enlisting in the army of a Napoleonic satellite state or ally. Others sought service in the British, Austrian or Russian military. This was not a new development. Service in another state's armies had a long tradition, especially in German Central Europe, where nobles from petty states often staffed the officer corps and bureaucracies of larger neighbours.

For common soldiers more prosaic reasons often underpinned the decision to enlist. Chief among them was the financial incentive. The disruption of trade caused by the Continental System and Blockade resulted in rising unemployment in some sectors and regions. Kevin Linch's study of recruitment in the British army shows that the majority of volunteers came

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[11] Catriona Kennedy, *Narratives of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars: Military and Civilian Experience in Britain and Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 41.

[12] Österreichische Kriegsarchiv (ÖKA), Vienna, B683, Ignaz Berndt, *Bemerkungen aus dem Leben eines Pensionierten Staboffiziers der österreichische* Armee, 161.

from economically precarious occupations, such as labourers, or were artisans and craftsmen in sectors undergoing technological change, notably handloom weavers. Under such circumstances, bounties, which rose from £16 6s in 1808 to £23 by 1813 for unlimited service in the infantry, were tempting[13].

Individuals might also seek to enlist because of familial difficulties, to escape trouble at home or from a sense of wanderlust. George Calladine, for example, declared he 'had an inclination for roving, so it came to my mind to enlist as a soldier'[14]. Indeed, many soldiers' memoirs read very much like travelogues in their description of foreign countries and peoples, a point to which I shall return.

Most soldiers, however, had little choice about serving since they were conscripts rather than volunteers. Many European states had operated some form of conscription or cantonal recruitment system prior to the French Revolution, but it was usually qualified by numerous exemptions. Annual conscription had been introduced in France in 1799 and was maintained throughout the Empire. French hegemony in the 1800s resulted in the abolition of many exemptions and the expansion of military service across Europe. The Napoleonic satellite states and allies were also forced to intensify their rates of conscription in order to meet the demand for manpower. Even in Britain militia service was far from voluntary, as it was decided by ballot. Militiamen, with their modicum of military training, were the targets of intense recruiting activity by the regular army.[15]

There were ways in which young men could avoid conscription. In most states the purchase of substitutes was permitted, although the cost of hiring one rose sharply during the

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[13] Kevin Linch, *Britain and Wellington's Army: Recruitment, Society and Tradition, 1807-1813* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 90.

[14] Michael Lloyd Ferrar (ed.), *The Diary of Colour-Serjeant George Calladine, 19th Foot, 1792-1837* (London: E. Fisher & Co., 1922), 3.

[15] For an overview of conscription in different European states see Donald Stoker, Frederick C. Schneid and Harold D. Blanton, *Conscription in the Napoleonic Era: A revolution in military affairs?* (London: Routledge, 2009).

period. In France, for example, it increased sevenfold between 1800 and 1815.[16] Some families met those costs by pooling their resources, signing contracts that bound them to contribute funds should one of their sons be conscripted. Young men could also seek to avoid conscription by marrying early.

There were also more drastic ways of escaping military service, such as self-mutilation. Alternatively, the prospective conscript could evade the draft or desert. This course of action was more feasible in areas of rugged terrain or close to state borders. The authorities took increasingly draconian action to stem draft-dodging and desertion. The families of deserters could find soldiers billeted upon them, with all the attendant costs, whilst mobile columns and gendarmes periodically combed the countryside to round up deserters. Amnesties were also periodically offered to encourage deserters to return to their regiments.

The autobiographical writings of soldiers reveal that a complex nexus of factors underpinned their decision to enlist. Patriotic sentiment was most often evinced in the writings of volunteers, but it was not incompatible with careerism, aristocratic duty, financial gain, or a desire for adventure. Perhaps the experience of the Prussian von der Marwitz family exemplifies the way that 'pull' and 'push' factors could be intertwined. Their estates ruined by the war in 1807, von der Marwitz needed to find his younger brother gainful employment. As members of the *Junkertum*, the family had a tradition of military service, but the reduction in the size of army in the Treaty of Tilsit meant that a commission in the Prussian military was unlikely. Von der Marwitz therefore sought to enlist his brother in the Austrian army where he would gain military experience in the service of his 'general' (*gesamt*) Fatherland, experience which he could later put at the disposal of his 'special' (*speziellen*) Prussian Fatherland.[17]

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[16] Isser Woloch, 'Napoleonic Conscription: state power and civil society', *Past & Present* 111 (1986), 113.

[17] Leighton S. James, *Witnessing the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in German*

Life in the Regiment

The terms of military service varied widely across Europe. The *Loi Jourdan* in France established a norm of six years' service for conscripts. In Russia, by contrast, conscription was for twenty-five years. Other states also had long terms of service but experimented with shorter enlistments as a means of increasing recruitment. But whether service was voluntary or conscripted, the experience of induction into the military was broadly similar across the continent. Recruits travelled to regimental depots for training in the basics of drill. Such transports were closely guarded as new recruits were mostly likely to desert at this point. Indeed, for new soldiers the days immediately after their enlistment could be a rude awakening. Several soldiers' narratives express dismay at the drunken and disorderly scenes they encountered. Echoing the Duke of Wellington, Private George Farmer described some of his fellow recruits as 'the scum of the earth', and Johann Nepomuk von Gruber wondered whether he had made a mistake when faced with twenty 'beastly drunk' volunteers[18].

The transition from civilian to soldier was symbolized by the provision of distinctive uniforms. These served not only to set the soldier apart from civilian society but also to mould and shape his body. Officers' accounts often took delight in the dashing appearance of their uniforms, but for common soldiers they imposed what often seemed an uncomfortable conformity. The use of leather neckstocks in the British army, for example, forced an upright posture and was particularly uncomfortable in hot climes. Soldiers were also encouraged or forced to change their physical appearance by adopting a certain hairstyle or growing a

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Central Europe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 74.

[18] G. R. Gleig, *The Light Dragoons* (London: Routledge & Co, 1850), 5; Austrian War Archive, B618, Johann Nepomuk Ritter von Gruber, *Merkwürdige Lebensperiode des k. k. Kameraden und Bezirksvorstehers von Gruber vom Jahre 1783 bis incl. 1849 zusammengetragen*, 10.

moustache. Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Marcellin Marbot adopted a false pigtail, tresses and a moustache to conform to the aesthetic of the 95th Hussars.[19] Russian conscripts, by contrast, had their heads shaved to symbolize their new status as soldiers.

The process of becoming a soldier was also marked by entry into the enclosed world of the barracks. Many European states had constructed barracks in the course of the eighteenth century, but this process appears to have been accelerated during the Napoleonic Wars. The existence of barracks contributed to the sense that the recruit was entering a different world. Historians of armies of states as diverse as Britain and Russia have argued that the regiments which the volunteers and conscripts entered formed their own 'self-contained societies' or 'worlds'.[20] Within these 'societies' individual recruits might continue to ply trades they had practiced in their civilian life. Artisans found that their civilian skills, such as shoemaking, carpentry or tailoring, were still very much in demand. Pickert, for example, tried to maintain his skills as a glove maker, while Benjamin Harris, a British soldier in the 95th Rifles, continued to work as a cobbler. The more educated among them could make extra money by writing letters for their illiterate comrades.

Drill, codified in manuals and regulations, aimed at making complex movements habitual through repetition. Although the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars saw the increased use of light infantry and skirmishers, the majority of infantrymen continued to fight in the formations familiar from eighteenth century battlefields, the column, line and square. The anonymous account of a soldier of the British 71st regiment of Foot provides a representative example of drill for common soldiers: 'Forced from bed at five o'clock each morning to get

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[19] Jean-Baptiste-Antoine-Marcellin Marbot, *Mémoires du général baron de Marbot* (Paris: E. Plon, Nourrit et Cie, 1891).

[20] This description has been applied to the armies of states as different as Britain and Russia. See John E. Cookson, 'Regimental Worlds: Interpreting the Experience of British Soldiers during the Napoleonic Wars', in Alan Forrest, Karen Hagemann and Jane Rendall (eds), *Soldiers, Citizens and Civilians: Experiences and Perceptions of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, 1790-1820* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 33; also Dominic Lieven, *Russia against Napoleon* (New York: Viking, 2010), 53.

all things ready for drill; then drilled for three hours with the most unfeeling rigour, and often beat by the sergeant for the faults of others'.[21] Many compared their status to that of a 'tractable beast of burthen' or a type of slavery.[22] Training varied by military branch and rank. The experience of Swiss-born David Karl von Ziegler, who enlisted in the 17th infantry regiment in the French army, provides a suggestive example. Drill was conducted from 4am to 7am. Lessons in military theory followed from 7 to 10 and again from 1 to 4. Dinner was followed by yet more drill from 5 to 8. As an educated son of a Schaffhausen councillor, Ziegler advanced quickly through the ranks, becoming a second lieutenant in the 4th Swiss Regiment before he was killed at the battle of Leipzig in 1813.[23] Similarly, Ignaz Berndt, a captain in the Reuss Plauen regiment, recorded his training in such subjects as mathematics, history, geography, fencing and the use of the bayonet.[24]

Ziegler's lessons in military theory seem to underline arguments that militaries underwent a process of increasing professionalization during this period that reduced emphasis on officers' gentlemanly bearing and conduct. Military academies had spread during the eighteenth century, but in the face of French success many other European states sought to improve their standards of military training. However, the extent of the transformation should not be overstated. Within the British army officers were still expected to show gentlemanly comportment.[25] Elsewhere, although officer corps were increasingly opened to those of non-noble backgrounds, the nobility still tended to predominate, particularly in the cavalry and the

[21] Anon., *Journal of a Soldier of the 71st, or Glasgow Regiment, Highland Light Infantry from 1806 to 1815* (Edinburgh: W. & C. Tait, 1819), 14-15.

[22] See Joseph Donaldson, *Recollections of an Eventful Life Chiefly Passed in the Army: By a Soldier* (Glasgow: n.p.,1824), p. 86. Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz (GStaPK), Berlin, IV Hauptabteilung Preußische Armee, Rep 15 B Militärgeschichte, Nr. 43, Tagebuch des sächsischen Offiziers Einsiedler, 1806-1817, 1.

[23] Jürg Zimmermann (ed.), 'Soldat des Kaisers: Erlebniss eines Schaffhausers in französischen Diensten. Briefe des David Karl von Ziegler aus den Jahren 1804-1807', *Schaffhausser Beiträge zur Geschichte,* 50 (1973), 186-189.

[24] ÖKA, B 683, Berndt, Bemerkungen, 180.

[25] Kennedy, *Narratives*, 46-47.

infantry.

Symbolic of the transition from civilian to military life was the submission to military discipline. This was notoriously harsh in some armies. The Prussian army, in particular, had developed a reputation in the eighteenth century for the severity of its discipline. Flogging was a common form of corporal punishment, although extra drill and confinement were also used. Corporal and capital punishment continued in the Napoleonic period, but in the French army the concept of the citizen-soldier meant that the harsh and often arbitrary discipline that had characterized the royal army gave way to milder forms of punishment. Similarly, the need to expand military service beyond the peasantry and make it more attractive to middle class youths led other states to introduce more humane forms of military discipline. Even in Prussia, for example, the right of officers to beat the soldiers under their command was curtailed as a result of the Military Commission's reforms, whilst the patriotic volunteers from the northern German states in 1813/14 were loathe to subject themselves to traditional military discipline, much to the chagrin of some regular army officers.

Recent research has suggested that the image of the eighteenth-century soldier herded into combat and more fearful of their own officers than the enemy is overblown and owed much to the rhetoric of the French revolutionaries.[26] In the eighteenth century, regiments sought to foster a sense of *esprit de corps* through uniform, music and standards, while attempts to invoke patriotic sentiment are identifiable from at least the middle of the century. Much of the patriotic discourse that linked military service, national identity and sacrifice and that characterized the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period had antecedents in the eighteenth century. Körner's hymn to battle, for example, echoed Thomas Abbt's 1761 tract, *Vom Tod für das Vaterland* (*On Death for the Fatherland*), written to celebrate military sacrifice

[26] See Ilya Berkovich, *Motivation in War: The Experience of Common Soldiers in Old Regime Europe* (Camabrige: CUP, 2017). See also Sascha Möbius, *Mehr Angst vor dem Offizier als vor dem Feind? Eine mentalitätsgeschichtliche Studie zur preußischen Taktik im Siebenjährigen Krieg* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2007).

during the Seven Years War.[27] Napoleonic armies built on these traditions in a conscious effort to raise the status of the soldier, and other European states rushed to follow them in publicly honouring military exploits.

Napoleonic armies, however, continued to share features with early modern militaries in a number of significant ways. First, they were often characterized by religious, ethnic and linguistic diversity. By 1812, the French army included Germans, Dutch and Belgians conscripted from annexed territories. The Prussian army included large numbers of Catholic Poles; the British army substantial numbers of Irish Catholics and Methodists. Throughout the wars, prisoners of war also provided a potential pool of manpower. The Russian-German Legion, for example, recruited from *Rheinbund* soldiers captured in Russia in 1812. Similarly, the King's German Legion recruited soldiers from German prisoners of war captured in Spain; and, although the proportion of foreign-born soldiers in the British army was lower than it had been in previous conflicts, an estimated fifth of the British army were German-born in 1815.[28] The Austrian armies were the most heterogeneous. A propaganda pamphlet circulated in 1809 addressed each of the Habsburg subject peoples, calling on them to rally around the throne. Despite the nationalist rhetoric, however, the armies of this period recruited where they could. Napoleonic armies, like their early modern predecessors, remained multi-ethnic, as well as religiously and linguistically diverse, organizations.

Nor were Napoleonic armies homosocial spaces, despite the attempts by some militaries to limit or exclude women during his period. Indeed, they included significant numbers of both women and children. Officers sometimes took their wives on campaign, as, more rarely, did common soldiers. Sutlers and camp followers also accompanied armies. The official status of these women varied. In the French army, sutlers enjoyed an official military rank. In

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[27] See Michael Gratzke, *Blut und Feuer: Heldentum bei Lessing, Kleist, Fontane, Jünger und Heiner Müller* (Würzburg: Könighausen & Neumann, 2011), p. 29.

[28] Mark Wishon, *German Forces and the British Army: Interactions and Perceptions, 1742-1815* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

the British army, soldiers' wives and sutlers did not enjoy such status, but companies were permitted to take six wives for every 100 men with them when they embarked for Spain.[29] Armies would also pick up any number of camp followers beyond those officially sanctioned by the military hierarchy as they marched to battlefields as far apart as Spain and Russia.

Common soldiers' wives, sutlers and camp followers left little in the way of an autobiographical record, although they are referred to in soldiers' narratives. These reveal that women performed a variety of services in the regiment, from offering companionship and sex, providing victuals and doing laundry, to handling paperwork and acting as 'agents of sociability'.[30] Soldiers' wives sometimes possessed skills useful in specific campaigns. Heinrich von Roos, for example, recalled one sergeant's wife, whom he names as 'Madame Weiler', whose ability to speak Polish was very useful during the invasion of Russia in 1812.[31] Furthermore, Jennine Hurl-Eamon has suggested that, contrary to stereotypes, women played an important role in the recruitment and retention of manpower in the British army. In both Britain and France, the sons of soldiers and their wives provided a pool of future recruits[32], while in Russia the status of soldier was heritable.[33]

Women also performed various roles on the battlefield, from tending to injured soldiers to carrying munitions. In some instances, they continued to support their husbands when they were captured. Rarer were women who fought, although some, such as Friederike Krüger and

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[29] See Charles Esdaile, *Women in the Peninsular War* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014).

[30] Kennedy, *Narratives*, 150-152,

[31] Paul Holzhausen (ed), *Mit Napoleon in Rußland. Erinnerungen von Heinrich von Roos* (Stuttgart: Robert Lutz, 1911), 35.

[32] For Britain see Jennine Hurl-Eamon, *Marriage and the British Army in the Long Eighteenth Century: The Girl I Left Behind Me* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 61-88. On France see Thomas Cardoza, '"These Unfortunate Children": Sons and Daughters of the Regiment in Revolutionary and Napoleonic France', in James Marten and Robert Coles (eds), *Children and War: A Historical Anthology* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 206 -215.

[33] Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, *From Serf to Russian Soldier* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 38-39.

Nadezhda Durova, were decorated for their bravery. Both Krüger and Durova disguised themselves as men, but in Spain a handful of women, such as Francisca de la Puerta and Catalina Martín, fought openly as women with the guerrillas.

The extent to which soldiers lived apart from civilian society should not be overstated. Whilst on campaign they continued to be billeted on the local population and, for better or for worse, there seems to have been ample opportunity for soldiers to interact with civilians. Many encounters were violent, but this was not always the case. Sometimes soldiers enjoyed cordial relations with the families with whom they lodged. Interaction with civilians also offered them the opportunity to buy and sell goods and the chance of romantic adventure. On a broader level, they sought to describe peoples and cultures they encountered in letters, diaries and memoirs, often applying cultural preconceptions and assumptions. Many reacted negatively when confronted with unfamiliar religious practices and modes of dress. French and German accounts generally described Russia as uncivilized and barbaric, an image already propagated in eighteenth-century travelogues and histories, and accentuated by the presence of Cossacks and Central Asian tribesmen in the Russian army. They also decried the Iberian Peninsular as backward and religiously superstitious, as did many British officers. Yet there was scope for positive interactions, too. An estimated quarter of the soldiers from the *Grande Armée* who survived their capture in Russia opted to remain and become Russian subjects, while some British volunteers clearly relished Spanish culture.[34] Similarly, British soldiers noted with surprise the good relations they enjoyed with French civilians in 1814 and 1815. A widespread desire to describe these encounters means that many accounts read like travelogues, a literary model that clearly influenced many soldiers-authors. Through their works these travellers in uniform helped to shape ideas of Europe and its boundaries that

[34] V. G. Sirotkin ‘La campagne de Russie. Le destin des soldats de Napoléon après la défaite’, *Revue de l’Institut Napoléon,* 156 (1991), 57-65; Graciela Iglesias Rogers, *British Liberators in the Age of Napoleon: Volunteering under the Spanish Flag in the Peninsular War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

would become stereotypes for the nineteenth century.

'A kingdom of the dead': Combat, Injury and Death

The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars saw an intensification of warfare. Of all the European battles that took place between 1490 and 1815, one-fifth were fought between 1792 and 1815. Prior to this period few battles had seen armies of more than 100,000 deployed. By contrast, some half a million soldiers fought at the battle of Leipzig on 16 to 19 October 1813, making it the largest battle in European history before the First World War. Large battles, however, were not the only form of military engagement or combat. Soldiers across Europe also participated in skirmishes and sieges. The amount of combat an individual experienced varied greatly, but the career of Franz Schulderer Edler von Traunbruck provides a suggestive example. As an officer in the Austrian army he participated in eight campaigns and fought in eight battles, three assaults, two sieges, one blockade and thirty-six skirmishes between 1799 and 1815. Remarkably, he was injured only once, although he was captured twice.[35]

Casualty rates could be very high. At Borodino, probably the bloodiest battle of the wars, those killed, wounded or captured numbered between 68,000 and 80,000. This represented between 21 and 27 per cent of the manpower at the battle. In the aftermath, Jakob Walter, a Westphalian soldier, commented that the battlefield looked like 'a kingdom of the dead'.[36] Soldiers were thus confronted with scenes of mass death and destruction. In the aftermath of battle, they were often forced to camp amongst the dying and dead and many narratives describe piteous scenes of the mortally wounded begging for aid even as looters and

[35] Austrian War Archive, B38, Dienstbeschreibung des Kaisers. König. Majors Franz Schluderei des Freiherr von Langenau, 49th Lin. Infant. Regts.

[36] Jakob Walter, *A German Conscript with Napoleon* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, 1938), 41.

scavengers preyed upon them.. Marching across battlefields from earlier in the campaign, they were exposed to rotting corpses and skeletal remains of men and horses.

Scenes of battle, therefore, loom large in many soldiers' memoirs, although authors sometimes downplay their ability to describe what they saw. Artistic developments, particularly the emergence of Romanticism, provided authors with a literary mode through which they could narrate their experiences. John Lynn has identified in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars a shift from a Military Enlightenment to a Military Romanticism in which more emphasis was placed on morale, feelings and passions. War was now seen as an art with Napoleon 'its outstanding artist'.[37] The extent to which Military Romanticism shaped tactics and strategy across the board is questionable, but in France, Britain and Germany it did influence memoir literature, encouraging authors to reflect on their feelings.

Recent research has identified a shift in soldiers' narratives whereby war was no longer depicted as an honourable endeavour, but became a revelatory experience in which the individual either uncovers some higher truth or has illusions of martial glory stripped away.[38] Certainly, memoirs in which the author places his experiences in a narrative arc often seem to support this reading. Other autobiographical documents, however, point to older, more traditional interpretations of warfare. The extensive collection of letters from Christian von Zimmerman to his wife reveals an ambitious officer hoping to make a name for himself on the battlefield.[39] Others, such as Pickert, provide a very matter-of-fact description with little reference to his emotional state before or during combat.

How did soldiers view the act of killing and wounding? Joanne Bourke has suggested in her provocative study that twentieth-century soldiers were not repulsed by violence, but

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[37] John Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2003), 196.

[38] Yuval Harari, *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[39] GStaPK, Berlin, VI HA Nl. Familie von Zimmermann, 23 May 1809.

rather enjoyed it.[40] Some soldier-authors of the Napoleonic Wars appeared to have relished combat, although they often shied away from describing the act of killing. Pauliny von Köwelsdamm, an Austrian officer, wrote of his role in the defence of Sandomierz in 1809 that: 'I did not have time to thank the Lord for protection. Truly, it fired me even more and I held this battle, for which there was no fame, as the most wonderful of my life for I was a cavalryman, infantryman [and] artilleryman. I was - to be fair - really daring and happy'.[41] Some soldiers, by contrast, described killing quite openly. Sergeant Bourgogne's graphic memoirs matter-of-factly relate shooting a Russian soldier at the battle of Krasnoë, whilst Christian Lindau, a soldier in the King's German Legion, recounts bayoneting several French soldiers in Spain. Killing was not restricted to the confines of battle. Several authors wrote of the necessity of killing prisoners, either because they feared being overwhelmed by their charges, due to pressures on supplies, or because they slowed the army down on their march. Few, however, exhibit the sense of enjoyment ascribed to modern soldiers by Bourke.

Combat and violence were not limited to the battlefield and uniformed soldiers. In some parts of Europe, most notably Calabria, Spain and Russia, guerrilla wars were fought against the French invaders. These struggles were characterized by excessive violence and war atrocities on both sides. They were also theatres that saw extensive use of irregular troops. French, German and British narratives often exhibit fear, loathing and contempt for these forces as they were not bound by the same laws of war, and they often refer to the torture and mutilation they meted out. Marcellin Marbot and Röders von Bomsdorff describe men nailed to doors and tortured in Spain and Russia respectively.[42] In Spain and Calabria, the French

[40] Joanne Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (London: Granta, 1998).

[41] ÖKA,Vienna, B 1505, Michael Freiherr Pauliny von Köwelsdamm, Historisch-Militär Tagebüch der Jahre 1801 to 1811, 151.

[42] Marcellin de Marbot, *The Memoirs of Baron Marbot*, late Lieutenant-General in the French Army, A. J. Butler (ed) (London: 1892), pp. 337-338; Otto Wilhelm Karl Röder vom Bomsdorff, *Mittheilungen aus dem russischen Feldzuge, an einen Offizier des Generalstabes*

reprisals against guerrillas and partisans led to a cycle of violence and atrocity. French notions of cultural superiority facilitated the use of such violence against the people they occupied, who were often described as savages, barbarians or religious fanatics. But it was not only the French who indulged in unrestrained violence. The fact that the British were allied to the Spanish did not prevent British soldiers from indulging in an orgy of pillage, rape and looting following the fall of Badajoz and San Sebastien.[43]

The brutality of the war in Spain, Calabria and Russia has been cited as evidence that the Napoleonic Wars represented a new form of warfare freed from traditional restraints. Yet Philip Dwyer has pointed out that there was 'nothing exceptional in the viciousness of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars' and that their 'savagery [is] entirely on a par with previous European wars'. Indeed, the British atrocities at Badajoz can be interpreted in this context. Taking a town or fortified position by storm was extremely dangerous and usually resulted in a high number of casualties. In the same way the French excesses arose from the struggle to dominate territory and extract resources from the lands they occupied, as well as from the general privations of war.[44]

The psychological toll of these experiences is difficult to gauge. Research on combat trauma has focused on twentieth-century wars. The language used to describe it, be that post-traumatic stress disorder or shell shock, had not been invented during the Napoleonic Wars. Nevertheless, soldiers' writings do sometimes hint at the impact that exposure to combat had on soldiers' mental health. Some point to the brutalizing impact of war. Octave Levavasseur, for example, wrote that the 'sight of the battlefields and the endless spectacle of the dead and

(Leipzig, 1816-18), vol. ii, p 39.

[43] Alice Parker, '"Incorrigible Rogues": The Brutalization of British Soldiers in the Peninsular War, 1808-1814' *British Journal for Military History* 1:3 (2015), 42-51.

[44] Philip Dwyer, '"It still makes me shudder": Memories of massacres and atrocities during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars', *War in History* 16 (2009), 381-405, 404.

wounded … eventually render the soldier callous and inhuman'.[45] A similar desensitization is exhibited in the account of a Scottish soldier who reflected on sight of the dead and wounded after Waterloo: 'I have been sad at the burial of a comrade who died of sickness in the hospital, and followed him almost in tears; yet I have seen after a battle fifty men put into the same trench, and comrades amongst them, almost with indifference. I looked over the field of Waterloo as a matter of course - a matter of small concern'.[46]

There are other hints as to the mental stress campaigning and battle placed on soldiers. Some French narratives referred to a feeling of apathy and lethargy that settled over some soldiers. Accounts that deal with campaigns with extraordinary high levels of suffering and hardship, such as the Egyptian campaign and the retreat from Moscow in 1812, refer to soldiers committing suicide.

Few soldier-authors expressed a fear of death, but many wrote about their fears of receiving a disabling wound, of losing an arm or leg. Soft lead musket balls flattened on impact inflicting traumatic injuries, whilst cannonballs could tear off limbs. Soldiers were much more likely to be injured or killed by artillery and gunfire than by bayonets or swords, as one side usually broke before it came to hand-to-hand combat. Some continued to fall victim to edged weapons. Lieutenant-Colonel Frederick Ponsonby of the 12th Dragoons was sabred and speared by a lance at Waterloo, yet he managed to survive his seven wounds.[47]

Ponsonby's survival is the more remarkable because of the limitations of contemporary medical practices. Although there had been some improvements in the organization of medical services for soldiers, particularly in the French army, treatment was largely limited to bandaging wounds and amputating mangled limbs. Soldiers' descriptions of field hospitals

[45] Cited in Marie-Cécile Thoral, *From Valmy to Waterloo: France at War, 1792-1815* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 33.

[46] Anon, *Journal of a Soldier of the 71st*, 225-226.

[47] Rory Muir, *The Tactics and the Experience of Battle in the Age of Napoleon* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 86-89.

reveal frightful scenes of screaming wounded and mounds of amputated limbs. Amputation could mean the end of a soldier's military career with the impoverishment that might follow. François Vigo-Roussillon recorded his relief that he would 'not be crippled' after being shot in the leg, whilst Gruber, similarly wounded, was horrified at the thought he 'should be a cripple at 17'.[48] Friedrich Wilhelm Magnus von Eberhardt was not so fortunate. His leg was amputated during the battle of Leipzig, but, writing to his mother, he sought to put a brave face on his injury, reassuring her that he had no fever. Eberhardt was fortunate, as infection and complications arising from wounds continued to kill soldiers long after the battle had ended. But he also insisted he would not 'become an inactive member of his Fatherland' as he had been assured by his superiors and the Prussian King that he would not forfeit his military career.[49] Eberhardt's noble status and rank meant that he fared well despite his disability, but common soldiers were seldom so fortunate.

Soldiers also risked being captured, and many soldiers' accounts of the war deal with their experiences as prisoners of war. In France alone there were an estimated half-million prisoners of war during the conflict. The fate of these men depended very much on military rank, social status, the circumstances of the campaign, existing cultural attitudes, and the circumstances of their capture. Captured officers who were drawn from the nobility and educated middle classes could expect better treatment than common soldiers. They were often released on parole once they had given their word of honour that they would not serve for the remainder of the campaign. When they were held as prisoners they were often allowed a high degree of freedom and often became involved in the social life of local communities. Even in theatres of war characterized by high levels of violence, such as Spain and Russia, officers could expect to be treated well if they survived their initial capture. One Bavarian

[48] Cited in Thoral, *From Valmy to Waterloo*, 88; ÖKA, B618, Gruber, *Merkwürdige Lebensperiode*, 18.

[49] Magnus von Eberhardt (ed.), *Aus Preußens schwerer Zeit. Briefe und Aufzeichnungen meines Urgroßvaters und Großvaters* (Berlin: R. Eisenschmidt, 1907), 150-151.

officer not only survived his sojourn in Russia but returned with a romantic keepsake; the lock of hair of a local woman. Similarly, British officers in Spain emphasized the civility with which their French captors treated them. Major George Simmons of the 95th Rifles wrote to his parents in 1809, 'The French are a brave and generous enemy, and their humanity to the English prisoners is generosity to the extreme'[50]. Such generous treatment could even extend to Spanish officers. José María Román, a Spanish military engineer, was transported to Nancy where he lived with Jean Blau, a professor at the university. Through Blau, he participated in classes and was introduced into the city's social circles.[51]

Common soldiers did not fare as well. Prisoners were held in existing fortresses and citadels rather than in specially constructed camps. They often provided cheap labour for local traders and farmers, a practice that allowed them to supplement their meagre rations. Like Pickert, they might also be employed on local infrastructure projects, though the episodic nature of the Napoleonic Wars meant that such prisoners were often released following the conclusion of peace, with the work unfinished. There were cases, however, where it was several years before the former soldier returned home.

A major exception to this charitable approach was the relationship between Britain and France. In the eighteenth century a cartel system had allowed for the exchange of prisoners of war during conflict. Napoleon abandoned the cartel system, and the long drawn-out war between Britain and France led to a growing number of PoWs in both countries. In France, British prisoners, both military and civilian, formed small communities whose activities reflected the social origin of the captives.[52] In Britain, prison camps were constructed at Dartmoor and Norman Cross to hold French prisoners and, after 1812, American prisoners

[50] G. Simmons, *A British Rifleman*, ed. W Verner (London: A & C Black, 1899), 33.

[51] José María Román, *Viaje y Prisión del Ingeniero Militar José María Román durante la Guerra de la Independencia (1808-1814),* ed. María Zozaya Montes (2008) [http://hdl.handle.net/10174/8840].

[52] Kennedy, *Narratives*, 121-129.

from Britain's conflict with the United States. Less fortunate prisoners were held in prison hulks in Portsmouth, Plymouth and Chatham. Here too, they were allowed to supplement their allowances by producing goods for sale at local markets.[53] Prisoners unable to add to their rations in this manner could face serious privations. Imprisoned on the island of Cabrera, off the Spanish coast, Johan Mämpel was reduced to eating grass when bad weather prevented the delivery of supplies[54].

Soldiers' bodies were subject not only to physical violence but also to the stress of campaigning; they were weakened by long marches in inclement weather across difficult terrain with inadequate supplies. Military rations were often insufficient to meet the calorific demands imposed by campaigning, and soldiers sought to supplement them either by turning to the sutlers, or by requisitioning and looting. These led to disputes and potential violence between soldiers and civilians, who often sought to conceal their valuables, foodstuffs and livestock from an advancing army. Foraging was also difficult in areas which witnessed repeated campaigns or were sparsely populated. These factors converged during the Russian campaign of 1812. French and German accounts of the invasion of Russia are replete with stories of starvation, hypothermia and internecine conflict as the discipline of the *Grande Armée* broke down.

In these conditions, diseases were rampant, and soldiers' narratives are full of stories of suffering caused by sickness. Indeed, despite the increased intensity of warfare, it was disease rather than enemy action that was the main cause of death. To give one example, of the estimated 240,000 British troops lost between 1793 and 1815, only some 27,000 died in battle or as a result of their wounds.[55] Typhus spread by lice resulted in thousands of deaths.

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[53] Gavin Daly, 'Napoleon's lost legions: French prisoners of war in Britain, 1804-1814', *History* 89 (2004), 361-380.

[54] Johan Christian Mämpel, *The Young Rifleman's Comrade* (London: Henry Colburn, 1826), 72.

[55] Muir, *Tactics,* 9.

Further afield, yellow fever and other tropical diseases decimated French and British expeditionary forces dispatched to the West Indies, whilst in Egypt they fell prey to bubonic plague. Finally, armies also acted as vectors of disease, passing pathogens on to civilian populations, who in turn passed them to newly arrived regiments. In this respect, the Napoleonic wars resembled early modern conflicts where both military and civilian losses were often due to disease.

Even when disease was not fatal, it could leave soldiers disfigured and disabled. In Egypt, for example, hundreds of French soldiers contracted ophthalmia, damaging their eyesight and, in some cases, rendering them blind. Wounds, disease and physical hardship meant that the constitution of many soldiers was undermined. Several accounts speak of premature ageing, and of family members who did not initially recognize them on their return because of the physical transformation wrought by the war or by the ruin of their health.

Conclusion

Soldiers' experiences in the Napoleonic Wars pointed in two directions. In many respects they prefigured the experiences of soldiers in later conflicts. Young men from Britain to Russia were subject to an intensification of mobilization and combat as armies and battles grew larger. They were also exposed to the patriotic discourse produced to legitimize the war effort and stiffen the people's resolve for what would be a generation of conflict. The status of soldiers was raised and martial sacrifice was celebrated across Europe, whilst the enemy was demonized as, variously, 'barbaric', 'fanatic' or 'irreligious'. Soldiers were also increasingly separated from civil society, physically marked out by their distinctive uniforms and spatially segregated by barracks. And the savagery of some of the fighting, particularly in Spain and in Russia, seems to have foreshadowed the unrestrained violence of later conflicts.

Yet, their experiences also belonged to the world of early modern warfare. Their accounts of exhausting marches punctuated by terrifying and confusing battles, of short commons and disease, of looting and hostile interactions with the civilian population that are common to so many narratives would have seemed familiar to soldiers of earlier wars. Moreover, despite the intensification of nationalist and patriotic rhetoric, Napoleonic armies were still diverse in their composition, encompassing different ethnic, religious and linguistic groups. They also, unlike later nineteenth-century militaries, were not homosocial spaces, but continued to incorporate large and fluctuating numbers of women as soldiers' wives, sutlers and camp followers. And though there was undoubtedly an accelerating professionalization of the military during this period, notions of gentlemanly conflict and 'civilized' war can still be discerned even in places were all restraint appeared to have been abandoned. In these respects, the Napoleonic Wars would appear to represent a staging post rather than a caesura.

Finally, there remains the question of how soldiers thought about and understood the wars. It was certainly the case that literary and artistic changes encouraged soldier-authors to focus on their emotional responses to what they had lived through, whilst increased literacy allowed more individuals to set down their experiences. The novelistic narrative arc presented in many memoirs prompted them to look back on their experiences as revelatory. Yet contemporary sources, such as letters and diaries, suggest that older understandings of war were still common. Similarly, the relationship between the soldiers' experience and the processes of commemoration and the construction of national identities is complex and multi-faceted. Rarely did soldiers merely ape patriotic discourses and interpretations when telling their stories. Perhaps most importantly, the soldiers of the Napoleonic Wars were not the passive recipients of contemporary propaganda or later interpretations of the wars. Their narratives were shaped through interaction between their own experiences, their audiences' expectations, whether familial or commercial, and the efforts of governments and others to

instrumentalize the wars.