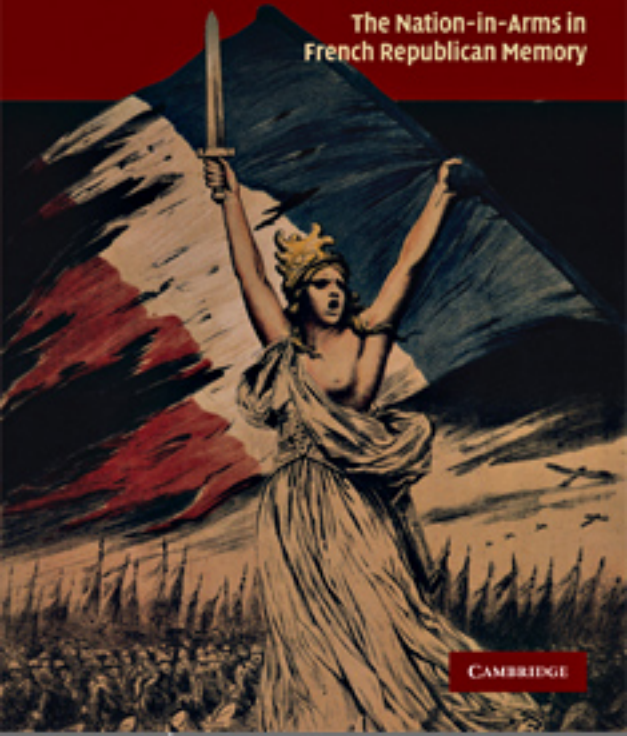
ALAN FORREST

The Legacy of the French Revolutionary Wars

The Nation-in-Arms in French Republican Memory



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The Legacy of the French Revolutionary Wars

A major contribution to the study of collective identity and memory in France, this book examines a French republican myth: the belief that the nation can be adequately defended only by its own citizens, in the manner of the French revolutionaries of 1793. Alan Forrest examines the image of the citizen army reflected in political speeches, school textbooks, art and literature across the nineteenth century. He reveals that the image appealed to notions of equality and social justice, and with time it expanded to incorporate Napoleon's victorious legions, the partisans who repelled the German invader in 1814 and the people of Paris who rose in arms to defend the republic in 1870. More recently it has risked being marginalised by military technology and by the realities of colonial warfare, but its influence can still be seen in the propaganda of the Great War and of the French Resistance under Vichy.

ALAN FORREST is Professor of Modern History at the University of York. His previous books include *Paris, the Provinces and the French Revolution* (2004), *Napoleon's Men: The Soldiers of the Revolution and Empire* (2002) and *The Revolution in Provincial France: Aquitaine, 1789–1799* (1996).

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Acknowledgements

My interest in the legacy of the Revolutionary armies began some years ago when I was principally concerned with the armies themselves and the young men who served in them. I was curious to know more about what motivated them and about the real as well as the rhetorical construct of citizenship; and I quickly became fascinated by the legend they created, a legend of commitment and enthusiasm as well as of republican equality that stretched into the nineteenth century and beyond to become a central strand of French republican identity. The idea of tracing that legend across the period from the eighteenth to the twentieth century took root in the years from 1997 to 1999 when I took part in a three-year research seminar at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, convened by Daniel Moran and Arthur Waldron, which brought together historians from Europe, America and Australia to discuss the legacy of the French *levée en masse* throughout the modern world. This collection was published in 2003 by Cambridge University Press under the title *The People in Arms. Military Myth and Political Legitimacy since the French Revolution*. It was the experience of participating in that seminar which persuaded me to work on the myth in the context of France itself.

As a historian of the late eighteenth century I have leant heavily on approaches and insights of historians from later periods of French history and must acknowledge the debt which this book owes to others. I have enjoyed long and fruitful exchanges with a wide array of friends and colleagues, most notably Michael Broers, Charles Esdaile, Robert Gildea, Sudhir Hazareesingh, Holger Hoock, David Hopkin, John Horne, Annie Jourdan, Matthias Middell and Kevin Morgan, who all, in very different ways, have fed ideas and insight into the project. I have found inspiration in the work of French specialists on the Great War and in the rich historiography that has come out of the *Historial de la Grande Guerre* at Péronne. And since 2005 I have benefited enormously from working with an international research group on the experience and memory of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, based here in

York and in Berlin. To Richard Bessel, Etienne François, Karen Hagemann, Leighton James, Catriona Kennedy, Jane Rendall and Marie-Cecile Thoral I owe a special debt of thanks. At Cambridge University Press I received support and encouragement from my editor, Michael Watson, and valuable advice from two anonymous readers. Various parts of the text have also been submitted to the criticism of conference and seminar audiences, both in this country and abroad. The role of school textbooks was the subject of a colloquium held by Anna-Maria Rao in Naples in 2003, while I discussed the central argument of the book in a seminar in 2004 at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris, thanks to a generous invitation from Patrice Gueniffey to spend a month there as a *directeur d'études*. Other sections have been exposed to the constructive criticism of seminar audiences in Cambridge, Liverpool, Dublin, Minneapolis and New York, and here in York in the congenial interdisciplinary atmosphere of the Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies.

As always, my greatest debt lies closer to home, to Rosemary and Marianne, to whom this book is gratefully dedicated.

Alan Forrest
York, March 2008

1 Introduction

It was during the nineteenth century that the legend of the nation-in-arms achieved its fullest expression, presenting an idealised image of the citizen-soldier to which republicans, in France and in many other parts of Europe, remained firmly wedded right up to the Great War of 1914–18. The legend was rooted in notions of civic equality and citizenship, emphasising the courage and resolution of young men who believed in their cause and fought for their people and their nation, selflessly and without regret. In a spirit of willing sacrifice that was reminiscent of the virtue of Athens or Sparta, they were depicted as heroes defending right against the massed forces of darkness, as the Gallic embodiment of an enduring Classical myth. And if in the twentieth century this image lost much of its potency, that had less to do with the popular appeal of the legend – the demand that all should serve the nation in moments of great danger, that rich and poor alike should share in acts of collective sacrifice, continued to be persuasive – than with the more specialist nature of warfare and the technological needs of modern armies. The imposition of mass conscription or the call to popular insurrection against an invader made sense when wars were fought by huge infantry regiments or when fighting meant sniper-fire from the roofs of Paris; they become less relevant in an age when armies have specialist tank regiments and rely on missile technology. This may explain why, in the twentieth century, the myth of the nation-in-arms proved more popular in the emergent nations of the developing world – China, Algeria or Vietnam – than on the European continent.[1] In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, conscription and forced recruitment remain almost universal; indeed, recruitment is not always limited to adult males as it was in France. Many African societies regard those thirteen-year-old boys who have participated in cultural rites of

[1] See the chapters by Arthur Waldron, Greg Lockhart and Douglas Porch in Daniel Moran and Arthur Waldron (eds.), *The People in Arms. Military Myth and National Mobilization since the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 189–255.

passage as having already attained adulthood; while the Constitution of South Africa specifically permits the recruitment in times of emergency of boys over fifteen years of age. Even children are part of the nation-in-arms.[2]

In 1996 France finally gave up its commitment to a conscript army and to the principle of universal military service, President Jacques Chirac accepting that modern warfare required a smaller, and above all a professional, army in which the ideal of the nation-in-arms no longer had a place. But the principle of universal service was not given up without a struggle; to many it seemed that it was part of the nation's culture that was being discarded, part of the republican identity of France.[3] For large sections of the Left, in particular, conscription was not just a fair and equitable basis on which to raise troops for the nation's defence. It was the debt owed by every young Frenchman to his country, and part of what Annie Crépin has identified as a 'triple apprenticeship' – for membership of the nation, for full citizenship and as an induction into the traditions of the French republic.[4] It was therefore seen as a central part of state pedagogy, and this was not something that could be lightly discarded. The issue of conscription had been discussed in a highly political – even an ideological – language. It had been a recurrent theme of the defence debates of the 1970s and 1980s, in which the Left had shown great reluctance to depart from the principle of universal service and from the ideal of civic equality. This stemmed in part from their deep-seated distrust of the officer class in the army, whom they were always prone to suspect of harbouring political ambitions and of plotting to seize power as they had done with Bonaparte in 1800, or Louis Napoleon in 1851, or – most recently – General de Gaulle in 1958. They were especially fearful of creating a separate military class of men divorced from the needs and ambitions of civil society. As recently as 1973 the Communist Party insisted that 'military service, equal for everyone, will be of a length of six months', adding that the equation of the soldier and the citizen must be safeguarded at all costs. 'A democratic statute for soldiers and officers will be adopted', while, to ensure their integration into

[2] Michael Wessells, 'Recruitment of children as soldiers in sub-Saharan Africa: an ecological analysis', in Lars Mjøset and Stephen Van Holde (eds.), *The Comparative Study of Conscription in the Armed Forces (Comparative Social Research,* vol. 20) (Amsterdam, 2002), pp. 239–40.

[3] The continued relevance of the ideal is reflected in correspondence in the columns of *Le Monde* during 1996.

[4] Annie Crépin, *La conscription en débat, ou le triple apprentissage de la nation, de la citoyenneté, de la République, 1798–1889* (Arras, 1998), p. 13.

society, 'military personnel will be able to receive freely newspapers and periodicals of their choice'.[5] Increasingly, however, theirs was a political rather than a military argument, until, at the time of the Gulf War, the emptiness of this rhetoric became patent to all. Armed with a force of young conscripts, France had neither the highly skilled troops needed to operate the most advanced tanks, nor the capacity – since they were largely manned by conscript sailors – to take their aircraft-carriers out of port.[6] From this moment the principle of conscription, like the ideal of universal citizen service, was surely doomed.

With it died the last embers of the legend of the nation-in-arms. The legend had its origins, of course, in the French Revolutionary Wars of the 1790s and in the fiercely patriotic discourse of revolutionary politics, when the *patrie* was in danger of invasion, and when France's soldiers were transformed into 'volunteers', fighting with republican commitment and ferocity to save their country from invasion and defend their new-won freedoms against the paid hirelings of tyrants.[7] The nation-in-arms was the force that turned the war around and repulsed the enemy from French soil. It was composed of men who were deeply committed to the cause of the people, patriotic, idealistic men, the cream of their generation, rushing to the frontiers and fighting selflessly to defend their homes, their womenfolk, their villages. The phrase was central to the revolutionaries' identity, and was rather indiscriminately used to describe whatever army the Revolution chose to place in the field. It was applied to the army of 1792, composed of an uneasy mixture of young volunteers and veterans of the line; the mass army of three-quarters of a million men that saved the Jacobin republic in the campaigns of 1793 and 1794; and even the men who set out to Italy and Egypt under the Directory to fight campaigns that were more imperialistic than revolutionary. All were described in ideological terms by their generals and their political leaders. And all, basking in the roseate glow of memory, took their place in the national narrative as patriots, republicans and idealists, fighting with courage and exuberance – a bravura that was itself specifically revolutionary – to defend a cause in which they profoundly believed.

This image necessarily gained new inflections over time, with the violent swings that marked French political life in the nineteenth

[5] Parti Communiste Français, *Programme commun de gouvernement du Parti Communiste Français et du Parti Socialiste* (Paris, 1972), p. 173, quoted in R.E. Utley, *The French Defence Debate. Consensus and Continuity in the Mitterrand Era* (London, 2000), p. 32.
[6] Utley, *The French Defence Debate*, pp. 185–6.
[7] Moran and Waldron, *The People in Arms*, pp. 1–5.

century, the Revolution giving way to the Empire, then to legitimism, to the July Monarchy, a second republic and a second empire, before finally establishing some kind of institutional stability after 1870 in the shadow of the Paris Commune. But the basic image, and with it the essence of the legend, remained largely unchanged. Indeed, the legend, what some preferred to call the 'myth', of the nation-in-arms gained in strength and in romantic appeal with the passage of time, as France appeared increasingly urban and materialistic – the France of Decazes and Royer-Collard, the Paris of Rambuteau and Haussmann. There was little in the values of political life which they could identify with honour and idealism, *élan* and derring-do; so many looked to the past, to the colour and drama of a very different age. Some continued to identify with the First Republic, and for those committed republicans the legend of the nation-in-arms acquired greater precision; it was the army of the Year II that continued to inspire their loyalty and admiration, the mass army constructed on the basis of a universal call to arms. But for many others the legend was almost infinitely flexible, with the consequence that little distinction was drawn between the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, between Valmy and Austerlitz, Campo Formio and Friedland. These were the high points of a golden generation, and of an era when France was the unquestioned master of Continental Europe. It was an adaptable, elastic image that appealed to many on the Right as well as on the Left of the political spectrum, and which was endorsed by such widely different writers as Balzac and Victor Hugo, Jaurès and Déroulède.[8]

This book is about that legend – its construction and adaptation over succeeding generations, its renewed vitality in moments of revolutionary insurgency like 1848 and 1871, and the manifold uses that were made of it in preparing the young men of the Third Republic – another generation whose lives would be scarred and dominated by war – for the trenches of 1914. If I have preferred to use the word 'legend' rather than 'myth', it is not because there was no mythologising, amongst French republicans in particular, but rather because in the images devoted to the republican armies – whether in art, sculpture, poetry or novels – there was also more than a grain of truth. The democratic image of the citizen-soldier, the potent emblem that was the nation-in-arms, these are the stuff of both myth and legend, developing over time to construct a powerful narrative that would be one of the foundation myths of the French republic. In this it shares much of the potency of another

[8] Alan Forrest, 'L'armée de l'an II: la levée en masse et la création d'un mythe républicain', *Annales historiques de la Révolution Française* 335 (2004), pp. 111–30.

national legend, that of the Anzac forces at Gallipoli, which did so much to provide twentieth-century Australians with a national identity, free from the constraints of the British Empire. It was at Gallipoli in 1915 – rather as at Valmy in 1792 – that the courage and fighting qualities of her soldiers gave Australia the 'baptism of fire' which helped forge her nationhood. The ingredients are so strikingly similar, and the national characteristics which they supposedly revealed were ones with which generations of Australians would be happy to identify and which everyone, from newspaper editors and war correspondents to the writers of war memoirs and regimental histories, reinforced.[9] Australians, it was emphasised, were not like the British troops alongside whom they fought against the Turks. They were self-reliant, loyal to their mates, egalitarian. And they had a hint of a wild streak which their countrymen recognised and admired. 'They seemed to belong', wrote George Johnson in one of the countless tributes to Australia's young heroes, 'not to the standard conceptions of military prowess and discipline, but to some other, younger, more exuberant world of the spirit'; they were 'activated by simple codes of loyalty and comradeship'; they respected their opponents 'far more than they ever admired or respected their own leaders'.[10] At Gallipoli, a heroic-romantic myth was born that would help shape a nation's identity.

The myth of the French citizen-soldier, like its Australian counterpart, had a basis in historical reality, or at least in a selective reading of that reality. There were volunteers and idealists among the soldiers of the Republic, young men who did dream of a new age that was dawning and wished to play their part in the betterment of mankind. There were selfless sons who bade their families a tearful farewell – the trope of so many a painting and popular print[11] – before sacrificing their lives in defence of the rights of others. There were young soldiers in the armies of Italy or the Rhine who wrote home from the front in 1794 to urge still greater sacrifices and more radical laws against hoarders or refractory priests.[12] Such men looked to their local clubs and popular societies for support, and they often saw the Jacobins as

[9] Alistair Thomson, 'A past you can live with: digger memories and the Anzac legend', in Alan Seymour and Richard Nile (eds.), *Anzac: Meaning, Memory and Myth* (London, 1991), pp. 21–31.

[10] George Johnson, 'Anzac: a myth for all mankind' (1965), quoted in Jenny Macleod, *Reconsidering Gallipoli* (Manchester, 2004), p. 6.

[11] For examples of these images see Michel Vovelle, *La Révolution Française: images et récit* (5 vols., Paris, 1986), vol. III, pp. 50–5.

[12] Alan Forrest, *The Soldiers of the French Revolution* (Durham, N.C., 1990), pp. 159–60.

their strongest supporters in civil society.[13] And among their officers there were increasing numbers of committed Jacobins who, after the fall of Robespierre on 9 Thermidor, sought careers in the army so that they could continue to pursue their dreams once the political stage had been denied them. Such men existed. They were not mere figments of the nineteenth-century mind, however furiously their royalist opponents cast scorn on their naivety or their bloodthirsty devotion to terror. But they were relatively few in number and hardly typical of the army at large – except perhaps during that brief Jacobin interlude when the armies were subjected to intense political propaganda and egalitarian values were spread by deputies on mission from the Convention and by *sans-culotte* militants within the ranks. Of all the forces revolutionary France put into the field, it was the army of the Year II that came closest to the patriotic ideal, closest to the army of republican dreams and to the revolutionary legend for future generations. In the words of the socialist Jean Jaurès, the revolutionaries had in 1794 created something new and rather special, an army that was close to the people and ready to fight in its name.[14]

It was also, the legend maintains, an army which, because of the strength of its beliefs and the sincerity of its patriotism, fought better and with greater commitment than other armies, with a courage and bravura unparalleled across Europe. Because they were citizens defending their homes and fighting for their rights, so the argument ran, they suffered none of the self-doubt and low morale that bedevilled the traditional armies of the day. And because they were truly representative of the French people, they shared the virtues and qualities of the population at large – their bravery (self-esteem dictated that every nation considered itself without equal in courage and strength of character), their reckless energy, their gallantry towards women. In keeping with more traditional French self-representations, they took pride in their sociability, their *légèreté*, their penchant for seeking out pleasure.[15] According to the republicans of the 1870s and 1880s, it was only to such an army, an army that identified with the cause and the character of France, that the people could entrust their defence. After the humiliating collapse of the army of the Second Empire in the Franco-Prussian War, it was perhaps unsurprising that the politicians should look to a moral solution rather than a tactical or strategic one. Like Jaurès they believed that

[13] Isser Woloch, *Jacobin Legacy. The Democratic Movement under the Directory* (Princeton, N.J., 1970), p. 195.
[14] Jean Jaurès, *L'armée nouvelle* (2 vols., Paris, 1992), vol. II, p. 248.
[15] David Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France. Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), pp. 147–9.

it was imperative for the army to rediscover the moral force that had characterised the men of the Year II, and they did not hesitate to draw the obvious parallel between the army of 1871 and its predecessor of 1793. 'On this very day 78 years ago', thundered Léon Gambetta on 21 September 1871, 'our fathers founded the Republic and swore, in the face of foreign forces which defiled the sacred soil of the motherland, to live free or to die in combat. They kept their word; they were victorious, and the Republic of 1792 has remained in the memory of men as a symbol of national grandeur'.[16] For Gambetta and the leaders of the Third Republic, identification of these values with republican virtue was self-evident. In a speech commemorating the revolutionary general Hoche, delivered in his home town of Versailles in 1872, Gambetta did not hesitate to link Hoche's military qualities with his devotion to the revolutionary cause. He was a paragon of republicanism, 'the son of the Revolution, and the child of the people created by the Revolution', who led the life of an exemplary patriot; and if he was a great general, it was because he was 'respectful of the rights of each and every individual, understanding the value of his men'.[17] The soldiers of the Year II were not just gentle knights in war; they were commemorated both as citizens and as republicans.

They had, in other words, become incorporated into a specifically republican legend of France's military past, a myth that was at once patriotic and revolutionary. In the process, the soldier of the Year II entered France's public history and took his place in popular memory. He would prove an enduring and largely uncontested figure, the most acceptable form of memorial to an age which was brutally divisive and which continued to conjure up contrasting memories in different regions and different communities within France. The soldier as man of the people, as citizen, lost much of his ideological force, to be integrated into that vague 'religion of liberty' which Raoul Girardet characterises as 'revolutionary sentimentality'.[18] He was remembered more for what he had achieved on the battlefield – his qualities, his patriotism, his professionalism in the face of the enemy – than for his supposed belief in the Jacobin cause. He could be represented as being both the defender of the nation and the representative of the nation as no political leader of the period could hope to do. He became, in other words, depoliticised in the eyes of posterity, one of the few figures emanating

[16] Léon Gambetta, speech of 21 September 1871, quoted in André Rossel, *1870. La première guerre, par l'affiche et l'image* (Paris, 1970).
[17] Léon Gambetta, *Le Général Hoche. Discours prononcé à Versailles le 24 juin 1872* (Paris, 1872), pp. 7, 11.
[18] Raoul Girardet, *La société militaire de 1815 à nos jours* (Paris, 1998), p. 25.

from the revolutionary years who was held blameless for the spread of political violence and with whom all might seek to identify. In this sense, rather like the image of Napoleon during the July Monarchy, the soldier of the Year II could act as a point of reference for both supporters and opponents of the regime, a figure aloof from party politics, whose historical legacy could be – and was – claimed by men of every political persuasion.[19] Bonapartists, radicals, conservative republicans and nationalists, all except the most legitimist of monarchists, might identify with the legacy of the revolutionary armies, using them to rally support and unify the people behind them. Even those republicans who aligned themselves with the extreme Right during the 1880s and 1890s – most notably the supporters of Paul Déroulède's *Ligue des Patriotes* – took obvious pride in donning the cloak of revolutionary patriotism, seeing themselves as the natural heirs of the soldiers of the Year II.[20]

Public history is, by its very nature, highly selective, an exercise in collective amnesia as much as in national commemoration, providing present generations with justificatory readings of their past. The French path from subject to citizen, as Pierre Rosanvallon has demonstrated,[21] would never be smooth or uncontroversial, and many saw in the French Revolution the germs of so much future antipathy, not least among those communities – royalists, Catholics, moderate republicans, opponents of terror and state violence – who counted themselves among the Revolution's victims and whose future identities had been largely moulded by a chastening experience of the First Republic.[22] For these communities – and locally, they were numerous – the legacy of bitter months of dechristianisation and denunciation, faction-fighting and settling old scores, conjured up memories of terror and counter-terror at town and village level. But if politics divided the people against one another, and continued to do so across the nineteenth century, the memory of military triumphs and the call of *la Grande Nation* elicited a much warmer response. In recalling the

[19] Robert Alexander, 'The hero as Houdini: Napoleon and nineteenth-century Bonapartism', *Modern and Contemporary France* 8 (2000), p. 457.

[20] Christian Amalvi, 'Nationalist responses to the Revolution', in Robert Tombs (ed.), *Nationhood and Nationalism in France from Boulangism to the Great War, 1889–1918* (London, 1991), p. 39.

[21] Pierre Rosanvallon has traced the development of French democracy in the period since the Revolution in a trilogy of volumes – *Le sacre du citoyen* (Paris, 1992); *Le peuple introuvable* (Paris, 1998); and *La démocratie inachevée* (Paris, 2000).

[22] The Vendée provides what is almost certainly the most glaring instance of a region whose entire identity was constructed upon its experience of martyrdom during the Jacobin republic. See Jean-Clément Martin, *La Vendée de la mémoire, 1800–1980* (Paris, 1989).

Revolutionary period for posterity the armies offered an acceptable face, an image of patriotic zeal and heroic sacrifice for a regime whose ideology was, in the eyes of many, sullied by bloodletting, vengeance and needless violence.

The presence in so many villages of old soldiers, veterans of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars who had returned home after years of campaigning to resume their civilian lives and – in surprisingly many cases – to assume responsibilities in the lives of local communities, ensured that the memory of war did not fade once military adventure ceased to have political appeal. They could not forget their adventures in the name of liberty and equality, or those – more frequent among the survivors of 1815 – in the armies of Napoleon. Military glories of the past seemed all the more resonant when they were contrasted with the decline in France's ambitions after Napoleon's exile, and their image was further burnished by the parsimonious treatment which the Bourbons reserved for those who had served the republic or the Empire and who now faced an 'impossible reinsertion' into civilian life.[23] Old soldiers looked back with pride, and asked only that their sacrifices be recognised by their compatriots. But how did the wider public, and in particular the public authorities, celebrate and reflect on the wars and the men who had fought in them? That would be an altogether harder question to resolve, as successive regimes sought to position themselves in respect to France's revolutionary tradition. In the process they selected their own myths, and constructed their own versions of the national narrative.

Some, like the Restoration monarchy, shunned any association with those who had fought for what it persisted in calling an illegitimate regime. Others, like the July Monarchy, made huge efforts to associate themselves and their public rhetoric with the military legacy of Bonaparte and of the Year II. All, of course, chose with care what part of that legacy to identify with, which heroes to elevate on national pedestals, and which values to incorporate in the mythology of the nation. Victories were hailed more often than defeats lamented – national galleries and army museums almost invariably bear witness to moments of triumph, skirting lightly over reverses and losses – while the cult of military leaders focussed on those who were tragic as well as heroic figures. Sites of memory in the nineteenth century shunned controversy, and the revolutionary army lent itself to this role, producing its quota of much-sung heroes – men like Hoche, Kléber and Marceau – who

[23] Natalie Petiteau, *Lendemains d'Empire. Les soldats de Napoléon dans la France du dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris, 2003), p. 141.

had died noble deaths, falling on the battlefield or in the line of duty, and who in death encapsulated chivalric values that were eternal and stripped of republican specificity.[24] Like Horatio Nelson in England, an equally compelling icon for a maritime nation, they were presented first and foremost as martyrs, their cult founded in the manner of their dying.[25] The fashion flourished particularly during the last quarter of the nineteenth century in France, in public sculpture, art, literature and theatre, largely in response to the popularity of the earlier cult of another revolutionary general, Napoleon Bonaparte.[26] One could praise the exploits of the Army of the Nord or of Napoleon in Italy without taking a public position on such domestic matters as the Terror, the Supreme Being, or the execution of Louis XVI.

The attention lavished during the nineteenth century on the revolutionary armies and their glorious achievements does, of course, beg the most central question of all. For supporters of the legend it was important to present the soldiers of the republic as a new and different kind of army, since, they insisted, it was its novelty and its egalitarian spirit that enabled them to turn a war of defence in 1793 into a great war of European conquest a year later. An army composed of citizens was necessarily, they believed – and here they were following the teachings of Clausewitz as much as their own political rhetoric – better motivated, driven by desire born of their status as full members of civil society: the 'elemental violence' of the people had been unleashed by the armed uprising of an entire nation.[27] But was it? Was the concept of an army of citizens as novel or as effective as apologists for the French Revolution liked to claim? Did the reality of army life in the 1790s reflect the political rhetoric of the age? Did the citizen-soldier succeed in giving the military a new and more respectable public image, effacing centuries of prejudice and contempt which had been heaped on the men who served the Ancien Régime?[28] In order to understand the power of the legend, we must first explore the army reforms that lie at its root, reforms which veered dramatically over the ten years of the Revolution before annual

[24] Michel Vovelle, 'Fortunes et infortunes de Marceau', in *Le Général Marceau. Figure emblématique du héros révolutionnaire* (exhibition catalogue, Chartres, 1996), p. 28.
[25] N.A.M. Rodger, 'Nelson and Napoleon: an Introduction', in Margarette Lincoln (ed.), *Nelson and Napoléon* (London, 2005), pp. 3–7.
[26] **Venita Datta, '"L'appel au soldat": visions of the Napoleonic legend in popular cul**ture of the Belle Epoque', *French Historical Studies* 28 (2005), pp. 1–4.
[27] Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, 1976), p. 479.
[28] E.G. Léonard, *L'armée et ses problèmes au dix-huitième siècle* (Paris, 1958), pp. 47–50.

conscription was finally introduced in 1799. It will become clear that, for all the apparent simplicity of the legend, it, too, had very different faces – obedience to the state and equality of obligation on the one hand, voluntarism and enthusiasm on the other, civil duty and spontaneity marching hand-in-hand against the enemy in defence of the nation and its people.

2 Creating the legend

It did not take the revolutionaries long to recognise that they had a problem with the line army that they inherited from the Bourbon monarchy, a problem which, even in 1789, manifested itself in a number of very different ways. The new regime could not assume the loyalty and commitment of its troops, and desertion rates soared, especially amongst officers who had taken a personal oath of fealty to the King and thought that their oath had been rendered irrelevant by the dramatic change in the polity. Many of the men in the ranks, too, became suspect in the eyes of the new government, since the authorities could not feel sure that they would obey orders when faced with a stream of countermanding political currents. Some were felt to be easily led and might follow their officers into counter-revolution or emigration; others could be intoxicated by the language of liberty and equality and lured into acts of indiscipline and mutiny. It could not be assumed, in other words, that the soldiers would remain obedient, carrying out without question the will of the new government, or that generals who had obeyed the orders of a sovereign king would now transfer their loyalty to the sovereign nation. The large number of resignations from high-ranking officers and the departure of many prominent military figures into emigration in Turin, Mainz and Coblenz added to the distrust which the revolutionaries felt for the officer class, while the violent mutinies at Nancy, Perpignan and elsewhere during 1790 fuelled fears that the line army could disintegrate, leaving Paris open to attack and the Revolution perilously vulnerable. The King's flight to Varennes the following summer was almost an incitement to noble emigration.[1] Regiments were left with gaping holes in their command, and there were fears that France did not have sufficient numbers of trained officers to put a credible army in the field. If the Revolution introduced dramatic measures to change the culture of the army, it

[1] Samuel F. Scott, *The Response of the Royal Army to the French Revolution. The Role and Development of the Line Army, 1787–93* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 108–9.

did so as much out of necessity – the perception that the existing structures were incapable of providing the new nation with adequate defence – as out of any ideological considerations. By 1792 France was at war with Austria and Prussia. And by then the emergency was both immediate and threatening, as over one-third of the officer class had resigned their commissions, many passing into emigration or offering their swords to the Emperor. Soldiers were short of supplies; uniforms and boots, rifles and ammunition were unobtainable while the contractors to whom the revolutionaries turned included unscrupulous profiteers and speculators, men like Bidermann and the Abbé d'Espagnac, who turned to their political allies to seal lucrative contracts.[2] It did not take the publicity surrounding Dumouriez's high-profile defection to ram the message home. The *patrie* was, indeed, *en danger*.

But that is not how politicians presented their reforms, nor yet how posterity has remembered them. The revolutionaries tended to the view that, in war as in everything else, they were breaking new ground, fighting a new kind of war for liberty and social justice and fighting it with a new kind of army. To the leaders of the Republic, in particular, this seemed self-evident. Theirs was a just war, fought in the cause of the people, and to fight it the nation needed an army of citizens, since only those who enjoyed the full rights of citizenship were capable or worthy of the task of national defence. Even the Girondin group in the Assembly, whom successive historians have suspected of favouring war for purely factional reasons and who may even have been conspiring to start a war that France would lose, argued the case in 1791 and 1792 in ideological and moral terms.[3] By declaring that the French nation was sovereign, argued Carra, the Convention was implicitly recognising the sovereignty of others; the deputies responded by granting fraternity and aid to all peoples who sought help from France to recover their liberty.[4] For this they required an army of committed republicans. As for the Jacobins – even those who, like Robespierre, had argued passionately in 1792 against involvement in unnecessary foreign adventures – they were eager to ensure that France's army was both national and patriotic, an army fit for the task of defending the people against their enemies at home as well as abroad. In this context, the refusal

[2] Jean-Paul Bertaud, *Guerre et société en France de Louis XIV à Napoléon Ier* (Paris, 1998), pp. 87–9.

[3] François Furet, 'Les Girondins et la guerre: les débuts de l'Assemblée législative', in François Furet and Mona Ozouf (eds.), *La Gironde et les Girondins* (Paris, 1991), pp. 189–205.

[4] Speeches by Carra and Lépeaux to the Convention, 19 November 1792.

of obedience to noble officers could itself be construed as a positive political gesture, as an act of revolutionary commitment. Soldiers, as Mirabeau had reminded the deputies, could never be persuaded to abandon their intellectual faculties because they were an integral part of the community, of the nation itself.[5]

Robespierre talked at length about the *patrie* and the need for all to be involved in its defence; indeed, in his corpus of speeches and published works,[6] a recent study has shown that he used the word *patrie* more often than he used *nation* (219 mentions as against 178), though by far his preferred form of collective reference was the more popular, democratic *peuple*.[7] He was largely uninterested in tactical questions, but fervent about the ideological context of the war, preaching incessantly about the justice of France's cause, arguing that it was a contest between the forces of good and evil. And if he shared the Jacobins' distrust of the officer class, he repeatedly proclaimed his belief in the integrity of the ordinary soldier, who, he argued, shared the fundamental goodness of the people from whom he had sprung, the people who were themselves trustworthy and patriotic, moral and virtuous, though necessarily also naive and often credulous.[8] 'Carefully avoid', he urged the deputies, 'everything that could ignite in the souls of the *citoyens-soldats* such military spirit as cuts off soldiers from citizens and which yokes glory and self-interest to things that make for the ruin of citizens'.[9] In a republic, he believed, army and civil society were as one, and any sense that the army formed a separate estate was inherently dangerous.

Historians of the Revolutionary Wars, especially those close to the classical French tradition of revolutionary historiography, have shown a marked reluctance to deviate from Robespierre's vision or to interpret the innovations of the early Revolution in other than ideological terms, preferring to present the army as a truly national force which could be relied upon to represent the new nation in war with the enthusiasm

[5] Marcel Reinhard, 'Observations sur le rôle révolutionnaire de l'armée dans la Révolution française', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, (1962), p. 170.

[6] Marc Bouloiseau, Georges Lefebvre, Jean Dautry and Albert Soboul (eds.), *Oeuvres de Maximilien Robespierre* (10 vols., Paris, 1950–67).

[7] Annie Geffroy, 'Le mot *nation* chez Robespierre', in Jean-Pierre Jessenne, Gilles Deregnaucourt, Jean-Pierre Hirsch and Hervé Leuwers (eds.), *Robespierre: De la Nation artésienne à la République et aux Nations* (Lille, 1994), p. 95.

[8] Annie Jourdan, 'Robespierre and revolutionary heroism', in Colin Haydon and William Doyle (eds.), *Robespierre* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 60.

[9] Robespierre, *Oeuvres*, vol. 7, p. 263, quoted in Alan Forrest, 'Robespierre, the war and its organisation', in Colin Haydon and William Doyle (eds.), *Robespierre* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 135.

that only citizenship could confer.[10] From Albert Mathiez to Albert Soboul – who devoted an entire book to *Les soldats de l'an II*[11] – they present an image of the nation-in-arms in which the soldiers fight less for themselves or for their officers than for a political ideal, until, in Soboul's phrase, 'in the ranks of the Army of the Year II, national fervour and revolutionary spirit were one and the same'.[12] It is an image that owes much to Jules Michelet and the romantic imagination of the nineteenth century. Michelet set the tone of much subsequent writing when he depicted the revolutionary armies as the people of France, arguing that in the 'heroic battles' of 1793 'our soldiers caught the spirit of an entire nation that had risen to support them; they did not have the people with them, but they had their force, their soul, the divinity of France'.[13] By inference, if not explicitly, the contrast is continually drawn between an army of citizens and an army hired by their ruler like the line armies of the Ancien Régime. These are often derided in the manner of Voltaire and so many of the *philosophes*, who dismissed eighteenth-century soldiers as men with no roots in society and no interest in the cause in which they were engaged, concerned only to accumulate loot and booty, men prone to violence and crime, whose enlistment owed more to poverty than to any sense of commitment, to family quarrels, to a desire to escape parental control, or to a simple sense of adventure. Some were recruited from the King's prisons; many were foreign mercenaries whose only loyalty was to their current paymaster. They had, argued the *philosophes*, no sense of their responsibility towards civil society, with the result that they were feared and treated as common criminals, as 'bands of murderers' across the whole European continent.[14] Revolutionary historians have tended to agree, emphasising the contrast between old and new, and suggesting that by 1789 the spirit of the armies of Louis XVI was being sapped by what Soboul calls 'an internal sickness', their dependence on the structures and social assumptions of the Ancien Régime at a time when officers

[10] This tendency is much less marked in English-language historiography. See especially T.C.W. Blanning, *The French Revolutionary Wars, 1787–1802* (London, 1996).

[11] Albert Soboul, *Les soldats de l'an II* (Paris, 1959). Soboul quotes with evident approval Clausewitz's dictum that 'in all circumstances war must be considered as an instrument of politics and not as an independent entity' (p. 7).

[12] Albert Soboul, *Comprendre la Révolution. Problèmes politiques de la Révolution Française, 1789–99* (Paris, 1981), p. 276.

[13] Owen Connelly, 'The historiography of the *levée en masse* of 1793', in Daniel Moran and Arthur Waldron (eds.), *The People in Arms. Military Myth and National Mobilization since the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 38. The republican writing of Jules Michelet is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 9.

[14] The phrase is from Voltaire's *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, quoted in E.-G. Léonard, *L'armée et ses problèmes au dix-huitième siècle* (Paris, 1958), p. 225.

and men alike were exposed to the patriotic spirit unleashed by the Enlightenment. 1789 would demonstrate that for army morale and discipline this was an intolerable tension.[15]

Instead of the underclass who served in the armies of kings and emperors, they imply, the French now had an army that represented all parts of the nation and was not limited to any single social grouping or section of society. For the first time the people of France accepted collective responsibility for their defence, and this not only gave moral force to what the armies were required to do but also helped provide legitimation for the state itself. Voices among the Jacobins, in particular, identified France's goals in the war with saving the revolution and securing the republic, which could be achieved only if the army was itself republican, since conquering the British and ending counter-revolution were two aspects of the same military campaign.[16] Hence revolutionising the army came to be seen as one part – an essential one – in the wider project of revolutionising society. In the process, of course, they constructed an idealised representation, of a young man whose patriotism was equalled only by his virtue. They also demonised the other, both the men who fought for the Holy Roman Emperor and the King of Prussia and those who had sold their services to Louis XIV or Louis XV. This demonising process was never wholly convincing, however, especially in areas like the East which had traditionally sent large numbers of men to the armies, and popular media like woodprints and folktales tell a significantly different story, expressing society's fear of soldiers and representing them as armed bands living on the margins of civil society, but also showing sympathy for the painful separation of soldiers from their families, the curious induction rites that marked out soldiers from others, and the harsh demands made on the young farmhand who was forced by poverty to sign away his life for seven years. Soldiering might be a violent and dangerous way of life, but it was not an unfamiliar one; nor was it without a trace of a glamour born of images of banditry and tales of derring-do.[17]

If presenting a damning indictment of professional armies came fairly naturally to the revolutionaries – were they not all the slaves of tyrants, fighting wars in which they had no stake or interest? – finding a coherent image of the revolutionary soldier was rather more difficult. Under the constitutional monarchy, when reforms took the form of responses

[15] Soboul, *Les soldats de l'an II*, p. 9.
[16] Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, *Les citoyennetés en révolution, 1789–94* (Paris, 1992), p. 170.
[17] David Hopkin, *Soldier and Peasant in French Popular Culture, 1766–1870* (London, 2003), pp. 215–39.

to crises rather than to any consistent ideology, the image of the army was especially confused. The revolutionaries had set their store by the abolition of privilege, yet the line regiments they had inherited continued to field the same officers and the same troops as in the 1770s and 1780s, despite the cycle of mutinies that had characterised the first year of the Revolution and the brutal repression that had followed. Twice they had recourse to volunteers – in 1791 and 1792 – but on the second occasion it became clear that the voluntary principle was incapable of raising the large numbers of soldiers they required. With the *levée des 300,000* in the spring of 1793 they abandoned the notion of a volunteer army (though they stubbornly refused to stop describing their troops as *volontaires*), moving instead to a system of local quotas proportionate to levels of population. This seemed for the first time to imply that citizens were expected to give military service to the nation, but there was no obligation: local quotas could be selected by whatever mechanism was most acceptable, and local communities were not obliged to resort to balloting or the drawing of lots. Some called for volunteers; others asked for nominations for what they flatteringly described as 'the most patriotic' men of military age; some brazenly selected paupers from their poorhouses or migrant workers who chanced to be passing through, or those – like shepherds and goatherds – who led isolated, marginal lives on the edge of village society. There were even communes, especially in agricultural regions, which organised collections so that they could seek out apprentices from nearby towns to fight in their stead. As for the rich and respectable, they could still find a way out of personal service by the simple expedient of buying a substitute to serve in their place.[18] The *levée* produced men for the army, without doubt; but it also raised charges of inequity and even of widespread corruption by those seeking exemption for their sons or their workers, charges which left large numbers of young Frenchmen feeling angry and disaffected. Jacobins and egalitarians were scandalised by the inequities that were tolerated, arguing that any system that permitted replacements was unacceptable to public opinion and damaging to the army. In Carnot's words, 'men get used to selling themselves like cattle', with the consequence that 'they make a business of deserting so that they can sell themselves to different battalions five or six times over', while strong men, good physical specimens, were being replaced by the lame, the alienated and men devoid of morality.[19] It was hardly the stuff of which legends are made.

[18] Alan Forrest, *Conscripts and Deserters. The Army and French Society during the Revolution and Empire* (Oxford, 1989), esp. pp. 26–32.

[19] Jean-Paul Bertaud, *La révolution armée. Les soldats-citoyens et la Révolution Française* (Paris, 1979), p. 101.

Until the extension of the war in the spring of 1793 to include Britain and Spain there had been talk of equality before the recruitment law, and of the duty to defend the nation that was incumbent on the young; but there had been little talk of conscription, and when there was, it was only to reject it out of hand. When, for instance, one of the foremost military reformers of the 1780s, Joseph Servan, author of a famous pamphlet on *Le soldat-citoyen*, proposed to the military committee of the Constituent Assembly that it introduce universal, compulsory military service, the idea found little support among the deputies.[20] Indeed, in these early months the issue was scarcely debated: one of its few supporters was Dubois-Crancé, who would go on to become War Minister in the Jacobin republic, who spoke out for a national system of recruitment that would fall, as he phrased it, on everyone alike, from 'the second person in the state' to 'the last active citizen'.[21] He argued against tolerating any form of replacement or of exemption on the basis of conscience; for, he said, quoting Servan, 'in France, every citizen must be a soldier and every soldier a citizen'. On examination, of course, this service was less than universal, since Dubois-Crancé was proposing to arm only active citizens, those of a certain social standing or owners of property, in defence of the state. But even this seemed far too radical for most of the deputies. Many were convinced that any form of compulsion should be avoided as a retrograde step, one that recalled the worst abuses of the Ancien Régime. The conscript, they argued, would make an unwilling soldier who was dragged against his wishes from the fields or the workshop; and there were those in the military who added that he would therefore make a bad soldier, a malingerer, lacking the passion and idealism which these wars required. They saw the patriotic enthusiasm and the vitality which they associated with the volunteer as the qualities that most clearly epitomised a revolutionary army, not the bureaucratically enforced equality of regular, annual conscription.

Even the Jacobins resisted conscription, though their response to the chronic manpower shortage which by the summer of 1793 was again threatening the country's military capability had moved a long way in that direction. This was the *levée en masse*, decreed on 23 August, a call to arms to the population at large that was intended to produce a mass army three-quarters of a million strong and repel foreign troops from French soil. This time the government took care not to repeat the mistakes of earlier levies by making it clear that military service must be

[20] For an account of the revolutionary career of Servan, see Jean-François Lanier, *Le général Joseph Servan de Gerbey (Romans, 1741 – Paris, 1808). Pour une armée au service de l'homme* (Valence, 2001).

[21] Annie Crépin, *La conscription en débat, ou le triple apprentissage de la Nation, de la citoyenneté, de la République, 1798–1889* (Arras, 1998), p. 19.

regarded as an integral aspect of citizenship, an obligation which fell on all equally, and by quite specifically excluding the possibility of *remplacement*. There was to be no distinction based on income or property-ownership; the poor as well as the well-to-do would be entrusted with the civic duty of national defence, and wealth brought no dispensation. Recruitment was to be organised on the simple egalitarian principle that the nation was the sovereign authority in the republic and that the nation was therefore entitled to demand, as of right, that all citizens of military age perform their military service as one of the fundamental duties which citizenship implied. All were put in a state of requisition, even if all could not be called upon to serve: the armies did not need to be submerged in raw recruits, while the republic recognised that civic and economic life must go on – the fields had to be tilled, taxes collected, administration and justice guaranteed. But the gesture was powerful, and the words of the decree were weighty, emphasising the principle of inclusion, a moment when civil equality and equality of obligation coincided and when the law recognised only one single form of citizenship.[22] All had discrete duties to perform, since all were part of the nation. Young men of military age were to serve in the armies, while the rest of the population were assigned a variety of support roles in the country's war effort – women through nursing or by sewing clothes for the warriors, children by making lint for use in hospitals, and old men by preaching the values of the Revolution in public places and exhorting the young to perform their patriotic duty.[23] The *levée en masse* was nothing less than the mobilisation of an entire nation in defence of its territory, its rights and its people. It appealed to the heart as well as to the head, and would be central to the legend of the revolutionary armies during the nineteenth century. Moreover, it imposed clearly gendered divisions, with men and women ascribed different roles in the military, the women limited to supporting professions like nurses, cooks and laundresses.[24] Yet small numbers of women, in this army as in most European armies of the day, did take up arms alongside their brothers and husbands, often cross-dressing to conceal their identity, and gaining a somewhat iconic status in the annals of revolutionary warfare.[25] They too would help fuel the nineteenth-century

[22] Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le modèle politique français. La société civile contre le jacobinisme de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris, 2004), pp. 25–55.

[23] For the text of the decree of 23 August 1793, see John Hall Stewart, *A Documentary Survey of the French Revolution* (New York, 1951), pp. 472–4.

[24] Patrick Bouhet, 'Les femmes et les armées de la Révolution à l'Empire', *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* 198 (2000), p. 14.

[25] Jean-Clément Martin, 'Travestissements, impostures, et la communauté historienne. A propos des femmes soldats de la Révolution et de l'Empire', *Politix* 74 (2006), pp. 31–48.

legend of the *levée en masse*. An image of sacrifice and enthusiasm as well as a symbol of civic equality, the *levée* would have a much greater resonance than the annual conscriptions that followed, remorselessly, year on year, after 1799, turning military service into an accepted rite of passage for young Frenchmen as they approached adulthood.[26] It had greater resonance for another reason, too, since there would be no further large-scale recruitment until that first conscription six years later. The men who were raised by the *levée en masse* would remain in the armies year after year, defeating the Prussians, fighting a civil war in the Vendée, before following Bonaparte into Italy and Egypt. They were, to a degree unparalleled by any other cohort, the men who fought for revolutionary France.

So, for posterity, the soldiers of the French Revolution would remain the men of the Year II. This was an army of idealists without precedent in history. Neither in the city-states of antiquity nor in earlier European revolutions, in England or Geneva, nor, indeed, in the infant United States had young men offered themselves for sacrifice in such a cause, a cause in which they believed. Future generations of Frenchmen would be attracted by their valour and by the generosity of their sacrifice. They found excitement in the revolutionaries' ambition, in the belief that France could be defended by volunteers alone, in their boldness in ordering the amalgamation of these volunteers with the old line units to form the *demi-brigades* of the Year II. They were dazzled by the scale of their achievement, as near-defeat in 1793 was turned into victory and successive coalitions were destroyed. They marvelled at the map of Europe with France's boundaries extended to the Rhine and the Republic surrounded by a reassuring assembly of sister-republics in Holland, northern Italy and Switzerland. For the armies that entered legend were, above all, victorious armies, led by young and dynamic generals who owed their promotion to their own intrinsic merit. For all these reasons, the soldiers of the Revolution would continue to command the admiration of generations to come, even from many who had but scant sympathy for their political goals. In the process they acquired characteristics and values which may not have been theirs, as the soldier's image became confused and distorted through the lens of memory. The successive phases of the Revolution were merged into a single image as very different military experiences were jumbled into one – the *patrie en danger* with wars of conquest, the call for volunteers with the

[26] The working of the system of conscription introduced under the Loi Jourdan is discussed in detail for one department by J.-A. Castel, 'L'application de la Loi Jourdan dans l'Hérault' (mémoire de maîtrise, Université de Montpellier, 1970).