

Workshop Report:

War Experiences and Identities: The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in Contemporary Perception

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Convenor:

- DFG-AHRC Project Group 'Nations, Borders and Identities: The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in European Experience and Memories' (Technical University, Berlin, Berlin College for Comparative History, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of York) and
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The importance of the armed struggles which took place across Europe and far beyond its borders between 1789 and 1815 for the framing of the political and military culture of the nineteenth century has been largely underestimated. The enduring legacy of this period of warfare related not only to the much analyzed after effects of the French Revolution, but also to the constant state of war which existed between 1792 and 1815. These wars touched nearly every European country and also parts of Asia, Africa and North America. There were for the first time conducted by mass armies mobilized by patriotic and national propaganda, leading to the circulation of millions of people throughout Europe and beyond (soldiers, prisoners of war and civilians). They affected, in different degree, the everyday lives of women and men of different religions and social strata across European and many non-European regions. The new style of warfare had far reaching consequences for civil society.

Those who lived through the period between 1792 and 1815 as children, youths and adults shared – albeit from the most varied perspectives and disparate perceptions – formative common experiences and memories.

Until now the focus of research has mainly been on the political, diplomatic and military dimensions of the wars, viewed principally through national historiographies. Comparative studies that emphasise difference, including metropolitan-regional differences, are rare, as are studies of the social dimension of warfare. Gender difference has, as yet, hardly been considered systematically.

The third workshop of the Anglo-German project group 'Nations, Borders, Identities' (NBI) encouraged work in all these areas, and highlighted the images and narratives that recur in the experience and perception of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars across and beyond Europe. It was organized by Karen Hagemann (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill/Technical University of Berlin) and Ruth Leiserowitz (Berlin School for Comparative European History) in co-operation with the German Historical Institute London and generously funded by the GHI and the German Research Foundation. The workshop, which was held at the GHI London on 24 and 25 February 2006, built upon discussions held at previous workshops on the existing state of research (November 2004, Military Research Centre, Potsdam) and the methodological parameters for a complex comparison of war experience and memory (November 2005, European Academy, Berlin). Seventeen participants from seven countries presented papers relating to the experiences and perceptions of soldiers and civilians in different European countries.

The workshop aimed to develop further comparative study of the experiences and perceptions of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. It asked how these wars were experienced by men and women of different ethnic backgrounds, religious affiliation, political *Weltanschauung*, age and familial status, as soldiers, sailors or civilians, abroad and at home. It considered the factors that most shaped experiences and perceptions of war and asked how

far these became a part of individual and collective identities. It examined the role of 'civilians at war', alongside the soldiers, sailors and non-combatants who volunteered or were conscripted. The discussion paid specific attention to the autobiographical source-materials for such experiences, mainly letters, diaries and published eyewitness reports from contemporaries. Many more letters, diaries and memoirs appear to have been published between 1792 and 1815 than during previous eighteenth-century conflicts. The participants debated the methodological issues involved in the reading of such source materials.

In his introductory lecture Alan Forrest (University of York) insisted that the experience of the 'ordinary' soldiers and civilians during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars has largely been neglected. In casting around for potential historiographical models through which to approach these experiences, he pointed to the innovative work on the First World War. He suggested that, in modified form, these may be applicable to the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. He also stressed the variety of motives and perceptions that were often subsumed into the official discourse of these wars. Often individual motives had little to do with state propaganda. What that propaganda did do was to highlight another important consequence of conflict: the accelerated nature of state building

In the first two sessions, focussed on military experience of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, Laurence Montroussier (Université de Montpellier) and Natalie Petiteau (Université d'Avignon) dealt with the experiences of the common soldiery. Montroussier examined how British and French soldiers perceived the Peninsular War. Taking a sample of war memoirs, she argued there were remarkable similarities in perception. There were, for example, no significant differences in how the British and French troops regarded combat. However, attitudes towards the foreign 'Other' were more complex. The British and French seemed to have generally held each other in high esteem, but both held largely negative views of the Spaniards and Portuguese, despite the fact that they were Britain's allies. Montroussier ended by pointing out the

need for more work on the attitudes of the indigenous population to the British and French in the countries and regions, which they occupied.

Petiteau raised questions about the role of soldiers in society once war is over. Focusing on demobilised soldiers, she explored the relationship between their experiences and the legends that grew up around them after 1815. Petiteau argued strongly that service in the Napoleonic army did not necessarily signify internalisation of a particular national ideal. There was a great deal of continuity between service under Napoleon and service for your prince under the Ancien Regime. Moreover, the supposed unity of the Napoleonic army was more apparent than real. The purchase of replacements underlined social inequalities. The common experiences of battle did foster common identity, but demobilisation after 1815 shattered that unity. Reintegration into French society meant veterans had to give up the prestige associated with the uniform. The majority seemed to have quietly returned to obscurity, but some found such a reduction in status difficult to accept and tried to subsist on their military pensions alone. Around this marginalised group the legend of the idle, Napoleon-worshipping veteran grew up.

John Cookson (University of Canterbury, New Zealand) also illustrated how soldiers were often an imperfect fit for ideas of national unity. Pointing to Linda Colley's seminal work on 'forging the nation', Cookson argued that the military had only been loosely integrated into accounts of the rise of British identity. The rank and file soldiery were more likely to articulate loyalty to their regiment and officers than to an idealised notion of the nation. This regimental identity was fostered by officers and by the development of regimental economies that included banks and saving schemes. Cookson suggested that, in light of this, paternalism was a better paradigm through which to examine the British army during the conflict. It was through paternalism that the British army was able to encompass the sub-nationalities of the British Isles, especially the Catholic Irish. 'Britishness' was created by default through comparison with foreign troops, rather than consciously mapped out.

Issues of patriotism also formed the core of the examination by Jarosław Czubaty (University of Warsaw) of Polish responses to the military. He illustrated how the Polish nobility eagerly answered Napoleon's demands for troops for his *Grande Armée* in the hope their desires for nationhood would be realised. Czubaty noted that nationalist sentiments were not the only motivation for enlistment. Impoverished nobles regarded the army as a source of income, social status and adventure. However, these baser motives often co-existed with the ideals of nationalism.

The two sessions that followed focused on "civilians at war". Patricia Lin (University of California, Berkeley) rejected notions that the experience of soldiers' families must remain hidden due to a dearth of relevant sources. She pointed to the records dealing with the system of remittances and allotments by servicemen to their families. Soldiers and naval personnel could arrange to remit part of their wages to their family. She argued that the common experience of collecting these remittances from the local tax official created a physical and virtual community among servicemen's families. Moreover, the system of allotment allowed families to collect the money and effects of servicemen killed in action. Often the amount collected by sailors' widows could be quite high due to the prize money paid for taking an enemy ship. Lin speculated that this could allow widows to buy their way into the middle class. Soldiers' wives were less well provided for, but the government did provide grants for the Royal Military Asylum, a school for soldiers' children. The admission applications reveal that significant numbers of soldiers married abroad and that regiments often acted as an extended family for their children should they be orphaned.

Katherine Aaslestad (University of West Virginia) maintained the focus on civilians in her examination of the French occupation of Hamburg. She described the deleterious effect the Continental System had on living standards in the port. She argued that it was this destruction of livelihoods that precipitated an anti-French revolt in 1813, rather than feelings of national identity. However, a sense of regional identity was fostered through the creation of the Hanseatic Legion and Directory. These bodies were aimed at

resurrecting the independence and autonomy the Hanseatic cities had enjoyed before occupation and were wary of German national sentiment. The discussion that followed dealt with the relationship between military, society and social change. The importance of military developments and their consequences for civil society were emphasised. Clive Emsley (Open University) broadened the question to ask what was new about the conflicts. There was general agreement that the rhetoric that accompanied the military campaigns, whether it was couched in the language of liberty or national identity, represented a real departure from the norms of eighteenth-century warfare.

Drawing on research into the experiences of the Southern German regions during the French Wars, Ute Planert (University of Tübingen) questioned how far it is possible to speak of a homogenous civilian war experience. Instead, she suggested, we should investigate the conditions that structured war experiences. She noted that it was often the phenomena that accompanied warfare such as requisitioning and the quartering of troops, rather than actual acts of warfare, which placed the greatest burden on the civilian population. Just how such impositions affected communities and individuals depended upon a variety of factors. Where those providing military quarters shared a common language, religion or social background with those who were billeted, amity could often replace enmity. The Church, as it had done for centuries, played an important role in mediating and interpreting war to their communities. While the war was initially understood as a divine punishment, accession to the Federation of the Rhine forced the clergy to present military service as an act of Christian compassion. It was only when they joined the anti-Napoleonic alliance in 1813 that a patriotic-nationalist tone was adopted by the clergy and the press, although this national paradigm continued to compete with alternative patterns of perception.

The role of the clergy in shaping and interpreting war experiences was also underlined in Ruth Leiserowitz's study of the Polish Catholic priest Jan Pawel Woronicz and the Russian Orthodox cleric Filaret Drozdov. In both Poland and Russia, Leiserowitz argued, the interpretations of war articulated and

disseminated by the clergy during this period formed the building blocks of national identity. When Napoleonic troops first marched into Warsaw in 1806 churches became key sites for the celebration of Polish liberation and were often decorated with regalia honouring the French emperor. In a fusion of religious and patriotic discourses Woronicz's sermons presented Napoleon as an instrument of God and the Poles as a chosen people, drawing parallels between their fate and that of the Israelites following the exodus from Egypt. In contrast, the Russian church was responsible for galvanizing anti-Napoleonic feeling and constructing an image of Napoleon as the anti-Christ. With the invasion of 1812 the Russian Orthodox clergy assumed an even more active role in anti-Napoleonic mobilization and over 50 field preachers were killed in the 1812 war. The majority though, made their contribution in the pulpit rather than on the battlefield, most notably the St Petersburg preacher Filaret Drozdov. Through his sermons and a thanksgiving prayer composed to commemorate Russian liberation, the Russian nation received a new religious consecration.

The gendering of war experience was the subject of the fifth panel with papers by David Hopkin (Hertford College, Oxford) and Karen Hagemann. Women's supposed inability to bear arms was used to justify their exclusion from full citizenship of the French republic, yet, as Hopkin noted, the figure of the disguised female soldier remained a prevalent image in French popular culture both before and after the revolution. Though the figure of the women warrior has been identified as part of a semiotic system that used gender to convey the lessons of the revolution, Hopkin raised the possibility that even at the time 'not everyone possessed the interpretive key' and that 'some women took these images not as allegory or analogy, but as model'. Those women who took up arms on behalf of the French republic often used language derived from fictional accounts of the female soldier to explain their actions. At the same time, rather than functioning as a symbol of female emancipation or as an allegory of political life, contemporary audiences may have understood representations of armed women as referring to the domestic battle of the sexes, where the female warrior became a powerful advocate on behalf of other women.

Karen Hagemann further examined the relationship between the personal and the political, between home and front. Through an analysis of the letters of the patriotic bookseller Friederich Perthes, who fought as a volunteer during the anti-Napoleonic wars of 1813-1814, and his wife Karoline, who first remained at home in Hamburg, and then had to flee with her seven children to Kiel when her husband was persecuted by the French, Hagemann showed how their experience and perception of war was shaped by gender. Whilst Friedrich Perthes responded enthusiastically and wholeheartedly to patriotic appeals to defend the fatherland and did not care much about the consequences of his political and military activities for his wife and family, his wife, even though she supported his aims in general, was more reluctant to fulfil her 'patriotic duty' by 'gladly' sacrificing her husband to the war effort. Nevertheless, she would later derive some pride from having successfully preserved her family through the war despite her husband's absence. This, Hagemann pointed out, indicates how war experiences could change women's self-image and involve a forced, unintentional 'emancipation' from their fathers and husbands. The gender-specific experiences are very obvious in the autobiographical letters and diaries written by the contemporaries, but were largely obscured in the collective memory of the wars, as patriotic memories of male heroism in defence of the fatherland came to predominate.

The final session focussed on the relation of war, citizenship and patriotic mobilization. While the memory of anti-Napoleonic resistance was central to the construction of German national identity, in Dutch collective memory the Napoleonic period has been viewed as a time of general calm and extreme passivity. Revising the image of a 'veil of lethargy draped over Napoleonic Holland', Johan Joor (University of Amsterdam) uncovered a significant amount of popular protest directed against the Napoleonic regime between 1806 and 1813, ranging from the circulation of anti-French rumours to large-scale riots. However, these protests, Joor argued, should not be understood as evidence of Dutch nationalist sentiment, but as part of a conflict between tradition and modernity, involving the defence of traditional patterns of

authority and individual liberties against the processes of centralization and modernization initiated by the Bonapartist regime.

Questions of national identity have been central to recent studies of the British volunteering. As Kevin Linch (University of Leeds) argued in his study of the Volunteers, the complexity of the movement makes it difficult to generalize about the experiences of those who were involved. Initially concerned with maintaining local order, the Volunteers would develop into a much larger national defence force. An individual's experience of part-time soldiering therefore depended on when he was a member. While volunteers' exposure to intensive patriotic propaganda and their participation in military pageantry at local and national events led them to engage with a wider identity, this was often focused on the regiment, or local neighbourhood. Participation in the movement could generate conflict between civilian and military mentalities, particularly where the Volunteers were called upon to suppress civil disturbances and, Linch concludes, the 'borders between civilian and soldier...were thin indeed'.

Claudia Kraft (University of Erfurt) returned to the relationship between gender, war and national identity, in her analysis of Polish patriotism between 1791 and 1815. Whereas French republicanism understood women as a threat to the fraternal martial bonding of the revolutionary army, during the Polish uprising of 1794 there was no such tension between femininity and militarism. Instead, Kraft argued, Polish women were called upon to play a key role in patriotic mobilization. However, the establishment of the Duchy of Warsaw in 1807 led to a reordering of gender relations according to the French rather than the Polish model. The Napoleonic Code enforced a conservative, patriarchal model of gender relations, whilst the adoption of uniforms by the civil as well as the military service served to demarcate the public sphere more firmly from the private. As soldiers flooded into the Duchy of Warsaw from the Polish Legions and the armies of the partitioning powers they would return imbued with the rhetoric of an exclusively male brotherhood of citizen-soldiers.

The commentators in the final round table on war experiences and identities summarized the results of the workshop and discussed the methodological issues which seemed most important to them. Richard Bessel (University of York) noted that the papers presented to the workshop supported the claim, made in the AHRC-DFG project, that the wars between 1792 and 1815 should be characterized as the first modern wars, which blurred the borders between the military and society. He questioned the degree to which we can ever truly uncover war experiences from the available sources, noted the emphasis participants had placed upon the horrors of war, and suggested that we should also be aware of the potential pleasures offered by war in terms of booty, sex and adventure. Jörg Echternkamp (Military Historical Research Centre, Potsdam) also pointed to the limited extent to which experience was recoverable. We should be alert to the silences within the sources. Conspicuous by their absence were death and dying. He distinguished between two parallel trends during this period. While there was growing awareness of national identity among the educated elite, for the majority of the population the war meant greater intervention of the state in their lives. He concluded by emphasising the need to study the legacy of the conflicts for the post-war generation. Jane Rendall (University of York) focused in her concluding remarks on the relationship between military and civilian society. She reflected on non-violent interaction between soldiers and civilians. She also commented upon how concepts and models drawn from civilian society, such as familial or paternalistic relations, might be reconstituted within the military.

At the end all participants agreed that the workshop had achieved its aim of opening up further research in this field. The publication of papers from the workshop is now being actively planned.

Further information about the international research network and project can be found on the NBI website:<http://www.nbi.tu-berlin.de/>