

# Napoleon's Men

*The Soldiers of the Revolution and Empire*

ALAN FORREST



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## *Introduction*

All wars are personal, in the sense that they are personal to those who fight in them. They produce moments of passion and exhilaration with which few peacetime experiences can compare; but they also leave a terrible debris in their wake, tearing families apart and leaving a lasting legacy of regret, fear, illness and depression that goes on to haunt so many former soldiers throughout the rest of their lives. Veterans of modern wars are encouraged to remember, by their families and friends, and by others interested in what they underwent. And because they are so much more literate than the soldiers of previous wars, many of them take the opportunity to write about their experiences, whether to share their triumphs or to confound their demons. As a result, we know more about them and about their lives in the military than we can possibly hope to know about the soldiers of previous generations, who too often remain mute, existing in history only as names or regimental numbers, devoid of the feeling and individualism which words alone can express.

*Napoleon's Men* is an attempt to fill that void for the French soldiers who fought in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars – wars which involved millions of men over a period of more than twenty years, and which, for the European world of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, can be realistically compared in scale to the world wars of the twentieth century. Of course many of the soldiers who fought in them, whether for France or for Prussia, Austria or Great Britain, lacked the literacy and the ability to express emotion which we have come to associate with those who fought in the mud of the Somme or who faced General Giap's guerrilla fighters in Vietnam. But what is astonishing is not how badly they wrote but rather that they wrote at all, driven by a desire to communicate with their families, to seek reassurance by keeping in touch with the outside world. They

wrote in their tens of thousands – something that cannot be said of previous generations, or of earlier European conflicts. From previous wars, of course, from the *Iliad* onwards, there survive occasional records of military experiences, usually those of generals, infrequently of officers, very rarely of other ranks. But the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars produced for the first time a mass army drawn from the population at large, the product of requisitions and conscription which fell upon all, regardless of their social position or their educational attainments. They may not have served willingly – not all of them, at any rate – but that merely ensured that they would reflect more fairly the feelings of society at large. It also meant that this was not an army of the poor and under-educated, and that not all lacked literary skills: they included in their number not just artisans and shopkeepers, peasants and labourers, but a considerable sprinkling of students, teachers, lawyers, clerks, insurance agents and public officials. Many also had a level of political awareness unparalleled in previous generations. They had lived through the French Revolution and had been educated to think of themselves as citizens, men with rights and with opinions. As a result this was not a silent army, one about whom our knowledge must necessarily remain limited. For the first time we have a substantial body of personal information, written by the generality of soldiers as well as by their chiefs. From their accounts we can assemble a portrait of eighteenth-century soldiering, of an army that we can know in a detail that would have been unimaginable in previous periods of warfare.

My focus in this book is on the soldiers themselves: on their experiences of army life and their emotions when faced with years away from their homes in the strangely unfamiliar environment of the military. It differs from most other studies of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars by offering no narrative of the period, unless by that is meant the collective narrative of the men who took part. Instead, what I present here is a view of the war years from below, as they were seen by those who spent a large part of their youth in the service of the Revolution and of the Emperor. How did they view the army and the profession of soldiering? How did they respond to the challenge of battle, to the long spells of boredom and drudgery, to the emotions of fear and passion that were unleashed by active engagement? How did they react when

faced with what was for many a severe and unwelcome test of their masculinity? Some, of course, became overnight heroes, and must have counted themselves lucky. But this is not a book about heroism. Rather it is about the contrasting reactions of ordinary soldiers to the conditions of warfare at the end of the eighteenth and during the early years of the nineteenth century, their fears and anxieties as well as their pride and their moments of intoxicating triumph.

They expressed the whole gamut of human emotions in the course of their long, wearying campaigns, not least that sense of adventure which soldiers have always shared and the wide-eyed wonderment of travellers faced with new experiences and alien cultures. Of course, there was nothing new in this. Young men from time immemorial had chosen to join the army to get away from poverty and tedium, family quarrels and judicial retribution; indeed, one of the attractions of soldiering had always been the opportunity to escape; that sense of freedom that came with the open road. And soldiers had always travelled, abandoning their farm or their village to respond to the call of arms in distant lands. The Ancient Greeks who served under Alexander the Great in Persia and the Swedes who followed Gustavus Adolphus across the plains of central Europe, to say nothing of the Crusading armies in the Holy Land or the Spanish and Portuguese forces who opened up Latin America to conquest, all had been excited by their adventures, just as all had wondered at the lands they discovered in the course of their campaigns. A large part of the identity of old soldiers, once they had left their regiment and returned, often uneasily, to civilian life, rested precisely on the fact of having travelled, of having seen interesting and exotic things, of having had experiences that were not available to the vast majority of the population. They had a reputation as the tellers of tales and the bringers of wonderment, even if many of their tales were deemed to be tall and the stories they told of doubtful veracity. Yet few had ever travelled on the scale of the generation who fought for the Revolution and Empire. The French armies barely stopped travelling, covering huge distances over many years, their soldiers moving inexorably from snow-capped Alpine passes to the hot plains of Castile, from the vineyards of Italy and the Rhineland to the deserts of Egypt and North Africa. Some had fought beneath the Pyramids, others in the sugar-islands of the Caribbean. And if it all ended disastrously in the snows of Russia, those

who returned came back with a wealth of travellers' tales about exotic landscapes and cultured capital cities, strange diets and novel crops. A whole generation of young men who would in other circumstances have ventured little beyond the confines of their native village was suddenly exposed to the wonders of an entire continent.

If the war is seen through the eyes of the French troops, it is also told, as far as is possible, in their own words, in the language they used to describe their experiences. Of course these words are not without their problems, for many expressed themselves with extreme difficulty, and in the heat of a military campaign few had the time or leisure to maintain a consistent or coherent record. But write they did, just as the young men who fought in other wars of the modern era – whether in the Crimea, in the American Civil War, or in the world wars of the twentieth century – showed a quite unquenchable appetite for writing and communicating with the outside world. These writings are of very different kinds. Some were the words they wrote down at the time in diaries and journals or turned to later in their memoirs when they looked back on their military careers. They might be written for themselves or to show to others when the war was over. But the vast majority of their writing was much more ephemeral and was not intended for the public gaze – the words they wrote to their families and loved ones in the hundreds of thousands of letters that were faithfully carried by the military posts back to the towns and villages of France. These letters form the major source for this book, and they provide precious insights into the most immediate concerns of the young soldiers. They ask after the health of parents and express fears for the harvest; they talk of generals and battles and military glory; they tell of wounds and spells in hospital; they report those moments of joy when they met friends and brothers and enjoyed a drink or a meal in a wayside inn; and they record their everyday miseries and deprivations, the drill, the poor food, the cold and hunger and lack of sleep. They also contain significant silences, on the large areas of military life which the troops appeared to eschew or found it impossible to discuss with others. Taken singly, these letters tell the stories of individual soldiers, revealing what was on men's minds at particular moments or what it was that they wanted their families to hear. Collectively, the many hundreds of letters that form the basis for this book tell much more than that. They allow us to

reconstruct the daily life of the troops, to understand what most affected ordinary Frenchmen and to reflect on their thoughts, their fears and their morale, and their responses to the very masculine culture of military life.

Works of literature they are not. Many were hastily penned by young men who often had only a modest education, or who consigned their writing to others, to men better schooled than themselves. But if they are poorly written, ungrammatical and banal in the sentiments they express, they also have the benefit of spontaneity and a lack of guile; indeed, they have a hauntingly honest quality which diaries and published memoirs lack. Besides, if we are seeking out the feelings and emotions of ordinary soldiers, they are the most significant source available to us. Unlike the Great War, this generation of conflict did not produce poets or novelists; and it left posterity with no visual or photographic record. These letters, however flawed and imperfect they may be, constitute the best mirror we have of the thoughts of serving soldiers, the most useful source for measuring their reactions and emotions and for comparing the rhetoric of their political leaders with everyday experience in the ranks. Of course they had drunk in much of that rhetoric and they shared in the culture of the army, the relief and joy when a battle was won and victory seemed in sight. That is only to be expected. But the letters also reveal another side of soldiering which the ideological language of Jacobin and Napoleonic speeches too often overlooks – the fears and anguish, and the sheer, unremitting tedium of life in the regiments. These are not glorious or heroic matters, and too often they are quietly overlooked in the histories of these wars; yet they are crucial to military morale and go far to explain the fevers and depressive illnesses suffered by the troops. Historians of twentieth-century wars, and most especially of the Great War of 1914–18, have long understood the importance of gloom and depression in soldiers' lives, the *cafards* of the trenches of the Somme and Verdun. But they were in no sense the prerogative of twentieth-century soldiers. As these letters make clear, they were widely experienced by the men sent to the Peninsula and on the Moscow campaign.

What the soldiers of the Great War did have was a power to communicate that was far more expressive than that of their less educated forebears. They were often older, too, more wise in the ways of the

world. And among them were men of letters of true literary distinction who could express eloquently what the men of 1792 or 1809 could only falteringly grope towards, the open analysis of their feelings and emotions. Yet it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that they were saying much the same thing, albeit in words that were innocent of literary artifice. They were proud to be soldiers, proud, possibly, also of the cause in whose name they fought. But the majority of them did not enjoy life in the army, and they craved the day when they would find a release from it. Among twentieth-century novelists are many who have expressed the mixed and often contradictory feelings that beset the soldier, the kinds of feelings to which these young Frenchmen were a prey. Whereas they were told to feel pride and honour, they too often admitted to other emotions, to homesickness and loneliness, boredom and fear, reactions which they half understood, and which left them confused and miserable. It is a condition familiar to all armies, one which the Canadian novelist Robertson Davies summed up memorably in the context of service with the Canadian Corps on the Western Front in 1915:

I was bored as I have never been since – bored till every bone in my body was heavy with it. This was not the boredom of inactivity; an infantry trainee is kept on the hop from morning till night, and his sleep is sound. It was the boredom that comes from being cut off from everything that could make life sweet, or arouse curiosity, or enlarge the range of the senses. It was the boredom that comes of having to perform endless tasks that have no savour and acquire skills one would gladly be without . . . But I was not discontented with soldiering; I was discontented with myself, with my loneliness and boredom.

The young soldiers who followed Bonaparte would have recognised that boredom and understood it as their own. They would also have understood the novelist's description of fear, the kind of fear which affected them after their first taste of battle and which they found so difficult to admit to, both at the time and in later life. As Davies analyses it, it too was a complex of emotions:

In France, though my boredom was unabated, loneliness was replaced by fear. I was in a mute, controlled, desperate fashion, frightened for the next three years . . . I think there were many in my own case: frightened of death,

of wounds, of being captured, but most frightened of admitting to fear and losing face before the others. This kind of fear is not acute, of course; it is a constant, depleting companion whose presence makes everything gray. Sometimes fear could be forgotten, but never for long.<sup>1</sup>



For Marianne

## *Acknowledgements*

This book has been a long time in the making, too often put to one side as I completed other writing commitments or found myself deflected by the demands of university administration. Initially my interest in soldiers' writings arose from chance discoveries in departmental and municipal archives and in the pages of local historical journals, often while looking for quite different things, and at that stage I saw them principally as a means to an end, as illustrations of men's feelings and of the texture of everyday life in the regiments. Only gradually did I become aware of their richness and variety and conclude that I should study them as documents in their own right. It has been a rewarding experience. Analysing the content of these letters and later discussing them with academic colleagues at seminars and conferences has helped me to appreciate their value as ego-documents, personal testimonies that provide explanations of military motivation and routes into men's minds and souls.

A glance at the bibliography will show that the quest for soldiers' writings, and especially of their letters home to their parents, has taken me to the four corners of France, and occasionally beyond. The quest was not always easy. Such letters are seldom catalogued in discrete series in archives; more often – since they had in their own right no clear administrative function – they are included in the series to which they related at the time of their insertion, which could be either civil or military, depending on whether they dealt with policing or desertion, or legal, the result of a claim for land or for an inheritance. Tracking them down often proved difficult, and would have been impossible without the active help of archival staff in widely dispersed departmental archives, from the Finistère and Pas-de-Calais to the Basses-Pyrénées (as it was called by the Revolution; it has now been more decorously renamed Pyrénées-Atlantiques) and Savoie. Indeed, one of my first steps

was to write to every departmental archivist in France asking whether, by good fortune, they had any such letters in their collections. My heart-felt thanks go to those – in some three-quarters of the *départements* – who took the trouble to reply and to investigate on my behalf, often providing precious call numbers and, in some instance, photocopies of their finds. These replies convinced me that there was, indeed, material there in manuscript form to supplement printed materials in journals and justify a larger-scale project. So, too, did the files of the Ministry of War, the *Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre* at Vincennes, where handwritten copies of many local letters – some of them now, sadly, lost in the original – exist in series Xw, the product of an unusual exercise in military history conducted in another age as part of officer training. These particular officer cadets were asked to visit local archives and libraries throughout France and to copy every document they could find concerning the army during the revolutionary period. They did so assiduously, and amongst the piles of paper which resulted are the texts of several hundred soldiers' letters, painstakingly copied from their original scrawl into legible copperplate. They, too, a generation of young men who doubtless went on to serve as officers in the French armies and to experience their own range of thrills and emotions in war, are due a word of appreciation for their efforts.

A more pressing debt, however, is to the living, to those friends and colleagues who have helped further this research and have encouraged me to bring it to fruition. In this country I have had long and fruitful discussions of parts of this work with a wide range of fellow-scholars, historians of both modern France and of warfare, often in the context of seminars and colloquia. In particular, I should like to mention Michael Broers, Malcolm Crook, Charles Esdaile, David Hopkin and Hew Strachan. In the United States I have enjoyed valuable exchanges with Michael Fitzsimmons and John Merriman, and was fortunate to be asked to give a keynote address on soldiers' writings to the annual conference of the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1999. My thanks go to the organisers, and especially to Owen Connelly, both for inviting me to what was an excellent conference and for permission to draw extensively on the text of that address while preparing Chapter 2 of the present volume. Similarly, various of the ideas that have been incorporated elsewhere in the book were first tested

on audiences at international colloquia, most notably at the Rudé Seminar at Canberra in Australia in 1996, and at Revolutionary and Napoleonic gatherings in Alessandria in Italy, Louvain-la-Neuve in Belgium and La Roche-sur-Yon in France. My appreciation is again due to the organisers of those events, in particular to David Lovell, Vittorio Scotti Douglas, Marcel Watelet and Jean-Clément Martin. The author and publishers are grateful to the following for permission to reproduce illustrations: Archives Départementales du Cher (p. 35); Archives Départementales de la Corrèze (p. 43); the Louvre/Bridgeman Art Library (pl. 12).

I also owe a debt of gratitude to those friends who have drawn my attention to sources, particularly to individual letters or letter collections which have found their way into the present research; who have generously shared their own research findings; and who have been *compagnons* on the rather tortuous *route* that has led to this publication. Bruno Ciotti, Steven Clay and Philippe Raxhon have all provided precious references to archives of letters in France and in Belgium; Chuck Walton has helped disentangle the intricacies of the military postal service; and Jean-Paul Bertaud has been a source of wise counsel all along the way. At Hambledon and London, Tony Morris and Martin Sheppard have provided both careful guidance and enthusiastic support; this is a much better book in consequence. More than any, though, my thanks go to my family: to Rosemary and Marianne, who have for too long had to live vicariously with the men of the revolutionary and Napoleonic armies and with my recurrent absences in libraries and archives. They must have begun to feel that this is their book as much as mine. Even Zaki, the family cat, has played his part, providing company through long hours of writing, and clearly empathising with the view so often expressed in the soldiers' correspondence, that the most important things in life are not glory or victory, but those ordinary creature comforts like food and warmth, security and companionship. It may not be a very heroic view; but who is to say he is wrong?

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## *The Armies of the Revolution and Empire*

Though war is not the immediate subject of this book, it provides its inescapable context – a costly and exhausting war which engulfed France and the French people for the best part of a quarter of a century, and in whose cause a generation of young Frenchmen would volunteer and be conscripted, fight and desert, enthuse, despair and be sacrificed. That they fought well and bravely is not in question: for proof we need look no further than their conduct at Valmy or Jemappes, Marengo or Jena. France demanded and obtained an inordinate level of sacrifice from that generation, from those young men unlucky enough to reach their eighteenth birthday between 1792 and 1814. It is their experience which is our concern here, their commitment and motivation, the fears and doubts that they expressed in the name of the French Revolution and the First Empire. Why did they answer the call to defend the *patrie en danger* with such seeming alacrity, or accept conscription into Napoleon's legions? What motivated them to fight in battle after battle, without apparent thought for their own survival, when glory had lost some of its initial glitter and they understood the grim realities of warfare? How did they react to the rigours and discipline of army life, the forced marches across Europe, the boredom of winter camp, the cold fear they experienced on the battlefield? And how did they respond, these young Bretons and Gascons, Flemings and Auvergnats, to being removed from their families and their villages, almost certainly for the first time in their short lives, to play their part in the great revolutionary crusade against the tyranny of kings? That they suffered is not in doubt. They often admitted to feeling desperately homesick, cut off from their parents and their culture, prone to attacks of weariness and lassitude – that raft of nervous and depressive illnesses which contemporaries described as *mal du pays*. They suffered, too, from deprivations of a more mundane kind, from a lack of warmth and sleep, food and drink,

boots and clothing. Too often supply trains were delayed, pay failed to come through, and men were left to forage for their own sustenance. How far did these deprivations affect their morale and motivation, or their belief in the cause for which they were fighting? And how deep was that belief? The soldiers of the Revolution, in particular, are often presented as young men fighting for a political cause, for the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity which they bore on their escutcheon. But were they? Or is this, too, little more than political rhetoric, one of the many fictions of the revolutionary years which would be embroidered by nineteenth-century republicans and passed down to posterity?

The declaration of war in the spring of 1792 was one of the critical moments of the French Revolution, one that dramatically affected both the course of the Revolution itself and the political history of Europe in the years that followed. It transformed government priorities and helped increase the sense of fear and paranoia which was to characterise so much of revolutionary history, particularly in Paris. It bore a heavy responsibility for destroying any possibility of political pluralism, for increasing the influence of the radical sections, and for expediting the resort to Terror. In the economic sphere it deprived France of a large part of its agricultural labour supply, undermined the progress of industrial development, and destroyed much of the prosperity of the Atlantic trade. Across the European continent it awakened dormant nationalist aspirations insulted by France's attempts to impose a cultural and ideological hegemony. It was no doubt unavoidable that the pursuit of victory brushed aside many of the Revolution's other objectives, most particularly in the field of social provision and public welfare, while the constraints imposed by a war economy further reduced the scope for achieving civil liberties. With the passage of time, indeed, the increasing emphasis on the needs of the war effort risked dominating the entire political agenda, as victory became an end in itself and as a more professionalised army quickly evolved its own distinctive loyalties and priorities. Unfairly, perhaps, many Frenchmen already saw the Directory as a regime beholden to the successes of its armies, its politicians increasingly despised and the eyes of the nation turning to the military for achievement elsewhere. Indeed, long before Napoleon seized power on 18 Brumaire, France had been transformed, from a nation fighting

for the integrity of its frontiers and its institutions, into an imperialistic power whose principal objective was to seize land from its neighbours and establish political control across much of continental Europe.

In theory, of course, revolutionary war was like no other, the product of foreign threats and patriotic insurgency, as the French people responded to the government's clarion call to defend the *patrie en danger*. Faced by the threat of an imminent Austrian invasion in 1791, the young men of France rallied to the nation's cause, the nation's and the Revolution's, since both French territorial integrity and the political gains made since 1789 were imperilled. They were, in the official language of the time, the language so consistently promulgated in decrees and proclamations, 'volunteers' who had offered their youth and, if necessary, their lives for the defence of France and its revolutionary principles. Their beliefs and selflessness stood in stark contrast to the desperate poverty of those who had composed eighteenth-century European armies, who frequently were too downtrodden or too marginalised to pursue any other form of career. Like the National Guardsmen who had responded to the crisis of 1789 and 1790 by coming forward to defend their towns and villages against attack from supposed 'brigands', the first volunteers were honoured by their communities and became symbols of the generous spirit of the young. Army reform followed, and with it the rights of active citizenship. Suddenly, France's soldiers were treated with unprecedented respect, allowed to vote, and encouraged to participate in public celebrations and festivals. A new age appeared to have dawned in which soldiers had a different status, a different outlook, a different relationship to society and the state.

But did they? Historians of the Revolutionary Wars have increasingly come to question the ideological nature of the conflict and to place these wars in the context of an eighteenth century scarred by commercial, colonial and dynastic squabbling between European states.<sup>1</sup> Official language seldom reflected day to day reality, and there is little evidence to support the notion that the soldiers themselves thought of this war as being so very different from the many conflicts which had littered the European landscape throughout the eighteenth century. Some, it is true, echoed the patriotic sentiments of the politicians or shared their ideological commitment to liberty and equality. They, like their leaders, were spurred by the seemingly ideological attacks of their enemies, in



the Declaration of Pillnitz and the Brunswick Manifesto, to defend their Revolution against outside attack and to fear a counter-revolution in the name of kings and despots. But occasional quotations rich in patriotic rhetoric should not be allowed to deceive us. Few of the men who answered the first call for volunteers in 1791 were prepared for the lengthy struggle that was to follow: many, indeed, thought of their service as lasting for one campaign season, and were fully prepared to return to their villages once the summer was over. Some, one might suggest cynically, even volunteered in 1791 precisely because war had not been declared and soldiering was still more about demonstrations of patriotic commitment than about risking life and limb on the battlefield. For if the call was generously answered in 1791, with most areas of the country providing an excess of volunteers (in some eastern departments the battalions were three and four times oversubscribed), there were many fewer willing to serve when the step was repeated in the following year, once war had been declared and that risk had become a reality. Some regions of the country even admitted that their people were naturally reluctant to offer themselves, arguing that the needs of agriculture or a lack of military culture had created a widespread revulsion for soldiering. In these circumstances it became clear that the revolutionaries could not hope to defend France in the spirit of its own rhetoric, with a citizen army of patriotic volunteers burning to defend the gains they had made since 1789.

The call for volunteers was therefore abandoned as an insufficient means of raising the large infantry battalions France needed, with the consequence that by the spring of 1793 the voluntary principle had already given way to a degree of coercion. Departments were called upon to provide quotas proportionate to their populations, as the government called for a *levée des 300,000* to offset the ravages of the first months of fighting. The term 'volunteers' was stubbornly maintained, along with the ideal that in the best of all possible worlds men would continue to come forward voluntarily, but few were deceived. Besides, the law did not presume to lay down how soldiers should be found; it merely insisted that communities meet their recruitment targets, stipulating that 'in the event that the voluntary enrolment does not yield the number of men requested from each commune, the citizens shall be required to complete it at once, and for such purpose they shall adopt,

by plurality of votes, the method which they find most suitable'.<sup>2</sup> In practice, the manner of their recruitment was seldom voluntary, as local authorities turned to various forms of balloting and imposition in increasingly desperate efforts to fill their quotas. A few, it is true, could do so with apparent ease, principally in those departments of the north and the east where men had for generations been accustomed to defend their homes and their farmsteads against invasion from across the Rhine. But in many departments, especially in the more historically recalcitrant areas of Brittany, the Massif Central and the Pyrenean foothills, recruitment remained sluggish, and local mayors were forced to draw lots, or pay for replacements, or – in a curious perversion of equity known as *scrutin révolutionnaire* – to call on their fellow-villagers to nominate the most courageous and most revolutionary to march in their name. This was rightly seen by many as an open invitation to deceit and evasion, and there were many cases where the process aroused bitter resentment, with villagers volunteering the sons of their most hated rivals, or callously nominating outsiders and men marginal to the community – seasonal harvesters who happened to be passing through on the day of the ballot, men drawn from marginal communities or living as shepherds on isolated hillsides, those who been banished from their parental home after an argument, or those who had been consigned by society to hospitals and poorhouses, or by magistrates to prison.<sup>3</sup> It was an instance where words like 'patriotic' and 'republican' could cover a host of social and moral peccadilloes.

The *levée en masse* of August 1793 marked a clear step in the direction of conscription, though conscription of an exceptional, one-off variety born of military emergency rather than a systematic annual exercise. The decree began with these famous words: 'Henceforth, until the enemies have been driven from the territory of the Republic, the French people are in permanent requisition for army service.' In theory the decree placed the whole population, young and old, male and female, on a war footing. 'The young shall go to battle, the married men shall forge arms and transport provisions, the women shall make tents and clothes, and shall serve in the hospitals, the children shall turn old linen into lint, the old men shall repair to the public places to stimulate the courage of the warriors and preach the unity of the republic and the hatred of kings.' And in each district the battalion that was raised was

to be united under a banner bearing the patriotic inscription, 'The French people risen against tyrants'. The levy, it was explained, was general, though in practice it was the young, unmarried citizens or childless widowers from eighteen to twenty-five years, who were expected to defend the frontiers.<sup>4</sup> The law was designed to avoid the abuses of the previous March, including the perceived unfairness of a system where anyone with money could buy themselves out of personal service by finding a man willing to fight in his stead. It did not, however, eradicate another source of unfairness, since the young men who left for the armies in the autumn of 1793 often faced a long and arduous assignment. For the law failed to define the length of each man's service: the conscript was to stay in the army until the end of the war, until peace was declared, and throughout the Directory it was on these conscripts of 1793 that the burden of the war continued to fall. Only in 1799, with the Loi Jourdan, did France see the introduction of systematic conscription, with the annual levy, *classe* by *classe*, turning into a necessary rite of passage for each succeeding generation as they reached their twentieth or twenty-first birthday.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the language of liberty was doggedly maintained, the revolutionaries cherishing above all else the belief that theirs was a new kind of army, an army that was truly representative of the French people, and whose success and tactical formation were based on the idea of the *masse*, of the combined force of the people in arms. It was certainly a far larger army than those which had served the Bourbons during the Ancien Régime, though the army which Louis XVI had at his command on the eve of the Revolution cannot be dismissed as insignificant: in 1789 the line army consisted of 121,000 infantrymen, 33,000 cavalry, and seven regiments of artillery – in all, some 170,000 men, excellently armed and equipped.<sup>6</sup> But numbers were not everything, and historians have increasingly come to question whether the combat capacity of the revolutionary forces was very much greater than that of the old line. Following the *levée en masse*, for instance, we know that the French could muster around three-quarters of a million men; yet the size of armies in the field remained stubbornly static. The significance of the *levée en masse*, however, extended far beyond the size of units or the sense that French battalions were more representative of the nation than those that had served Louis XVI. It became a powerful symbol

of national unity and patriotic endeavour, a symbol which would be respected by future generations of Frenchmen and would inspire them in hours of need or of national emergency – in the Revolution of 1848, for example, or during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, or again in the years following the Dreyfus Affair when France was once more girding her loins for war.<sup>7</sup> It proclaimed the volunteer spirit of the French people while accepting the right and duty of the state to organise the country for war; and it envisaged the mobilisation of all the people, regardless of age and gender, to contribute to that war effort.<sup>8</sup> It would also have a wide international resonance that extended far beyond its country of origin, influencing military thinking throughout much of nineteenth-century Europe and helping to mobilise opinion in large areas of the Third World – in China and Vietnam, for instance, and on all sides during the Algerian War – where peoples sought both a symbol of their nationhood and a practical form of military organisation to fuel their struggle against a colonial or imperialist power.<sup>9</sup>

The *levée en masse* was unique in that it made no concessions to wealth or to regional identity. Unlike previous levies and most of the conscriptions that followed – the only exception being the very first conscription, in 1799 – service had to be carried out in person. All were equally liable, and no provision was made for the more affluent to buy themselves out by finding men willing to serve in their stead. Politicians followed Maximilien Robespierre in praising the integrity and virtue of troops born of the people and united in defending the nation; the soldiers, he argued, were intrinsically good precisely because the people from whom they sprang were good. But did the *levée*, as the revolutionaries claimed, produce a new kind of army? Did French soldiers fight differently because they enjoyed civil rights, because they could vote, could discuss public affairs, and could even join political clubs and popular societies? French revolutionary historians, from Jean Jaurès to Albert Soboul and Jean-Paul Bertaud, have argued that they did, that there was a commitment, a self-belief and *élan* about the Revolution's volunteers which went far to compensate for their lack of tactical knowledge and experience in battle, and which contributed mightily to early victories. They had as their inspiration the classic work of Clausewitz *On War*, which claimed that with the Revolution conventional warfare had changed for ever. 'War had again suddenly become