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Were the Revolutionary Armies Revolutionary?

Alan Forrest
University of York

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The view of the Revolutionary armies as patriotic, idealistic and innovative has proved extraordinarily resilient. Yet most of the evidence for this view lies in rhetoric and in the Revolution's clarion calls to sacrifice and patriotism. It was politicians, not soldiers, who first suggested that the Revolutionary armies were inherently different from traditional armies and that they fought from an idealism and inner faith that other troops could not share. This paper re-examines some of these assumptions and asks how far we should accept the equation of republican and citizen, soldier and volunteer, or the revolutionaries' claim that theirs was a better-motivated army which fought differently from others, with the relish of free men pitted against the 'slaves' of the 'tyrants' who, they liked to assert, ruled in the other states of Europe.

There are certainly reasons for doubt. The Revolution may have filled its armies, but it did so with increasingly reluctant conscripts and sustained consistently high desertion rates, while the evidence of the writings these recruits left behind is ambiguous. Though some soldiers

did write about their Revolutionary ideals or expressed contempt for the rural backwardness and provincial piety which they encountered on campaign, such instances were not numerous; indeed, in their letters home most soldiers limited themselves to the customary complaints of men at war about the poor quality of their rations and the gruelling conditions of the march. Where they expressed the hope of obtaining a rapid victory, it was often in the context of ending the war and returning to see their loved ones; if they showed faith in their generals it was because they believed that they were inspired tacticians who could lead them to victory and save their lives. There was little that was revolutionary in this. It would suggest that French soldiers had come to think like any other soldiers, concerned with the day-to-day realities of war, with avoiding crippling wounds, with simple survival.

And what of the supposed differences from the army they replaced, the army of the Bourbons? Recent research suggests that the image of the ancien régime army contained in Revolutionary speeches is something of a caricature. It would seem that French soldiers before the Revolution also fought with passion and commitment, that they shared and understood concepts of military honour, and that they largely consented to the punishments meted out. This paper discusses the implications of these findings for our reading of the revolutionaries' claims, and it examines some of the reform proposals made after the debacle of the Seven Years War. The Bourbons, of course, never implemented these ideas; it took a political revolution to do so. But the ideas were not new. Like so much of what the revolutionaries achieved, their army reforms did not spring perfectly formed from the Revolutionary imaginary; rather, they had been part of a lively military debate for several decades. It was one of the Revolution's achievements to back the reform lobby and enact some of the measures that it had advocated for a generation – as a response to the military crisis the country faced.