

The People in Arms

*Military Myth and National Mobilization
since the French Revolution*

Edited by

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and

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Introduction: The Legend of the *Levée en masse*

Daniel Moran

The chapters presented here are concerned with the mass mobilization of society for war and with the cultural and ideological constructions that surround and arise from such events. The aim of this introduction is not to summarize the chapters that follow, nor to impose an unduly restrictive gloss on the range of historical episodes they survey, but simply to highlight the organizing themes and threads of shared historical memory that bind those episodes together and make it worthwhile to consider them between the covers of a single book. That the book in question might have been longer goes without saying. Our goal, however, was not to exhaust our subject – an impossibility, as we hope our efforts illustrate – but simply to demonstrate the enduring significance of some basic patterns of thought and action, rooted in the experience of Revolutionary France, but spreading from there to a wide variety of other contexts.

Our book takes as its point of departure a decisive moment in the history of the French Revolution: the *levée en masse* of August 1793. The *levée* marked a major step in the radicalization of the Revolution and in the escalation of the war between France and its neighbors. Alan Forrest's chapter describes the circumstances that gave rise to it and analyzes its military and political effects. Without reproducing that discussion here, a few preliminary comments on the *levée* are in order.

The *levée en masse* introduced military conscription into the new French Republic. Under its terms “the French people” [*tous les Français*] were placed at the disposal of the armed forces. Young men were to serve in battle, while married men, women, children, and the elderly were to provide various kinds of economic, logistical, and moral support. At a stroke, the *levée* replaced former theories and regulations concerning the obligation of military service with a universal concept far more encompassing in its moral claims, and in its coercive implications, than any that had prevailed under the Old Regime. That such a measure should have been the work of a revolutionary republic made it all the more startling.

When war broke out between France and the Habsburg Empire in 1792, nearly all French republicans regarded compulsory military service as tyrannical. Its introduction a little over a year later was justified, in official and public rhetoric, by a new ideology of revolutionary patriotism and social mobilization, undertaken to defend the nation against invasion. Although the *levée* was obviously compulsory in character – having been adopted because of the short-falls of earlier, voluntary recruitment measures – its prescriptive core was obscured by its proclaimed ability to give voice to correct attitudes and opinions. Since patriotism and republicanism had acquired supreme moral value, the coercive nature of revolutionary military recruitment was rendered, or at least declared to be, invisible. The power of the state to conscript people into the army was represented, with some success, as an expression of individual freedom, an internalized social obligation linked to the new ideal of citizenship that the Revolution had also advanced. As a number of the chapters that follow note, the French Republic never referred to its soldiers as conscripts, always as volunteers – a distinction that, however implausible on its face, would prove surprisingly robust.

The Republic's effort to compel military service by idealizing it as a form of personal virtue was an attempt to legislate a kind of psychological adaptation that in the past had only existed as a social process. It was, in other words, a quintessentially revolutionary act. The goal was to create, within the mass of French citizens, a moral and social dynamic that bears some comparison (although it was not made at the time) to the aristocratic conception of honor. Honor, too, depends upon an internalization of social norms, which come to be represented, and to some extent subjectively felt by those concerned, as authentic expressions of the individual personality. The aristocrat's honor is a set of external prescriptions and expectations expressed in the form of a personal code, a transference from society to individual that is reinforced by a complex symbology, and a variety of privileges and sanctions. The nameless state of mind rhetorically imputed to the citizen-soldier by proponents and memorialists of the *levée en masse* is the same. The distinctive element in the revolutionary summer of 1793 was not that France's leaders sought to square the circle of compulsory service and freely accepted obligation, but that they did so as a direct expression of the state's power to shape society according to its requirements.

The *levée en masse* might have been remembered simply as an emergency wartime measure, under which the rights of individuals were temporarily but reasonably abridged. Instead, it has gone down in history as a spontaneous, voluntary expression of the French people's ideals and enthusiasm, to which a revolutionary regime had merely given practical effect. This is the root and essence of what the contributors to this volume have referred to as the "legend" of the *levée en masse*. That legend's credibility was reinforced by the striking accomplishments of the armed forces the *levée* created, whose power far exceeded the requirements of national self-defense.

The decree proclaiming the *levée* presented it as a purely reactive measure. Those called up were supposed to serve only until foreign troops were expelled from France, a provision that was later ignored. Like the Reign of Terror, to which it was linked, the *levée en masse* was not merely a response to impending danger but an open-ended process of mobilization designed to make revolutionary change all-encompassing and irreversible. It sought to expand the French army but also to transform it by instilling it with revolutionary energy and values. Its success would be measured not by the speed with which its victorious citizen-soldiers would be free to return to their homes, but by their swift assumption of the strategic offensive, and the subsequent rapid expansion of French power in Europe.¹ Nevertheless, to observe that the *levée en masse* represented an expression of state power does not make it an expression of the state's strength. On the contrary, both the *levée* of 1793 and all the other examples discussed in this volume were undertaken by regimes or revolutionary movements in the throes of dissolution or reconstruction, who sought to bolster their limited moral energies by appropriating those of society at large.

The *levée en masse* of 1793 was a historical event with significant consequences and a source for one of the most powerful organizing myths of modern politics: that compulsory, mass social mobilizations merely express, and give effective form to, the wishes or higher values of the community and its members. It is the latter phenomenon – the social mythology, rather than the institutional mechanics, of national mobilization – this is our chief interest, though the two can never be treated in complete isolation from each other. A number of our authors trace the historical memory of the French Revolutionary *levée*, whose continued saliency for the history of France and its empire is explored in the chapters by Owen Connelly, John Horne, and Doug Porch. Still, no general claim is intended about the motivating influence of such ideas, compared to the other, more proximate forces that may be at work at any given time and place. Our general claim is rather that the distinctive ideological configuration exemplified by the *levée* has proven adaptable to a wide range of circumstances and has accordingly become one of the vital, recurring structures of modern politics and modern war.

One adaptation that proved particularly consequential was achieved by Prussia, the enemy of France that went the farthest in attempting to reconcile revolutionary military methods with the requirements of a conservative social order. In 1813 the Prussian state threw off its imposed alliance with France and embarked upon a military mobilization that, for the first time, extended the obligation, and opportunity, to serve in war through all

¹ The case for interpreting the *levée en masse* as something other than a purely defensive measure was first made by Peter Paret in a seminal article, oft cited in the chapters that follow, and recently reprinted. See his “Conscription and the End of the Ancien Régime in France and Prussia,” *Understanding War* (Princeton, 1992), 53–74.

levels of Prussian society. Within the framework of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras, the Prussian *Erhebung* (a term that, like the French *levée*, combines the meaning of the English words “uprising” and “levy”) was the movement that came closest to capturing the dynamism (not to mention the military effectiveness) of the French effort twenty years before. It also demonstrated that the pieces of the puzzle carved out and assembled by the Jacobins of the Year II could be put together in ways that deprived them of their revolutionary import. Like the *levée en masse*, Prussia’s *Erhebung* would become the object of an intricate and by no means self-consistent mythology. For some, it would testify to the civic virtue of the educated middle class, whose retrospectively exaggerated willingness to defend the nation weapon in hand would become a token of their rightful claim to greater political influence. Others, however, would portray Prussia’s mobilization as an affirmation of dynastic authority, in which a somewhat belated royal call to arms becomes the key moment in the national awakening. In either case, the common note is one not of revolutionary ferment, but of social discipline: a *levée en masse* rendered safe for the consumption of liberals and conservatives alike.

The *levée en masse* in all its forms is distinguished by the scale of its claims upon society, and by the character of the moral and political arguments employed to legitimize it. These rest on complex linkages between citizenship – in some circumstances a purely imaginary phenomenon in itself – military service, political authority, and transforming social action. Such linkages have often been asserted without reference to the example of 1793, nor necessarily in precisely identical terms. Similar episodes have been justified as policies initiated by the people, and then carried out by the state, or as government measures that respond to the sentiments of a saving remnant of loyal, right-thinking people, in the midst of social crisis. In all cases, however, one finds a characteristic tension between the coercive requirements of collective military action and the legitimizing rhetoric of freedom, spontaneity, and popular approval.

The legend of the *levée en masse* provided a compelling ideological justification for universal military service and for the dramatic expansion of state power in wartime. It helped foster the belief that popular forces, raised in an atmosphere of heightened ideological pressure, were exceptionally powerful or even invincible, particularly against armies of professionals, mercenaries, or ordinary conscripts. The present volume includes cases in which the spirit of the *levée* is embraced by revolutionary movements or resistance organizations, so that the element of state authority may be missing, or oriented toward a postrevolutionary future that did not yet exist. Conversely, there are a number of examples in which explicit claims of revolutionary action are absent. The Prussian *Erhebung* is one – though it included a heightened expectation that popular military exertion would be matched by political concessions in the future. As John Chambers shows, American admiration for

the Prussian nation in arms was detached from America's own revolutionary tradition, whose iconic figure, the Minute Man, bears closer resemblance to the *franc-tireur* of the new-born Third Republic than to the conscripted *Landwehrman* of Bismarck's Germany – a resemblance that made scant impression on American journalists at the time. Mark Von Hagen's chapter on Russia and Arthur Waldron's on China are both concerned with conditions in which the issue is not necessarily how to effect radical change but also how to promote reform and consolidate revolutionary achievement. That the ideal of the people in arms may even serve the cause of reaction is demonstrated in Doug Porch's chapter on Algeria, where the OAS, a rightist conspiracy with no appreciable social base, sought to graft the rhetoric of the *levée en masse* onto a campaign of counterrevolution. That the OAS should have imputed a great capacity for mass mobilization to its almost equally isolated Algerian opponents only heightens one's sense of the legend's power.

Whatever else one may say about the people in arms, there can be no question that it has enjoyed a formidable military reputation, which often becomes a force in itself. That force is usually described as "people's war," the prospect of which has become one of the imposing strategic realities of modern times. The chapters by John Horne and Michael Geyer provide contrasting examples of its power, if not to vanquish the nation's enemies, then at least to focus the minds of its professional soldiers.

In the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, the idea of the *levée en masse* was inevitably submerged beneath the practice of normal politics. It became a kind of underground spring, from which, as my chapter later in the book seeks to show, liberals in particular attempted to draw some sustenance, but without releasing, or even acknowledging, its latent energy. In the last months of the Franco-Prussian War, however, the people in arms were recalled to life by the defeat of the French Empire, and the appearance in its place of a new republican regime, whose first act was to proclaim a new *levée en masse* to drive out the invader. As John Horne's chapter demonstrates, the psychological impact of this effort far exceeded its military achievements. The *franc-tireur* of 1870 became a crucial legitimizing prop to the French Third Republic, while instilling its sibling and hereditary opponent, the Second German Empire, with an obsessive fear of partisans and irregular warriors, whose murderous consequences would become fully apparent in the opening months of World War One.

What, exactly, were Germany's (and not just Germany's) soldiers so afraid of? One is inclined to answer "total war," of which "people's war" is an important expression – the seminal one, indeed, which the annihilatory technologies of the twentieth century have amplified. Yet war on the largest possible scale, entailing the systematic militarization of society and its subordination to the needs of the armed forces – both explicit elements of the French *levée* of 1793 – could scarcely be regarded as anathema to Europe's military elite. The specter of "people's war" invoked by the nascent Third

Republic, however, was not merely one of unbounded violence, but one of violence that had slipped the leash of state control and taken on a life of its own.

Its unnerving appearance in Berlin during the last weeks of the First World War is the subject of Michael Geyer's chapter. As Geyer shows, when confronted with imminent defeat, significant elements of Germany's civilian leadership were prepared to contemplate a *levée en masse* of their own, despite a clear recognition that, in military terms, the result would be not national salvation but certain and catastrophic defeat. For them, the myth of the citizen-soldier's invincibility, at least, had lost its hold. Yet they longed for his appearance just the same, if only as a means of affirming the nation's honor in extremis. For the German officer corps, however, such desperate measures were repellant, not just because they lacked any underlying strategic rationality but also because their adoption would threaten the institutional integrity of the regular army. That, in the end, Germany's leadership turned away from the *levée en masse* as an instrument of self-slaughter was undoubtedly a capital moral accomplishment. Yet the fact that such a prospect should have been so plainly visible testifies to how far Europe's military possibilities had progressed over the course of the nineteenth century.

In the twentieth century they would be projected onto a still larger stage, as the colonized world caught up with the West's capacity to mobilize social energies for war. A preliminary example on the fringe of Europe occurs in Russia, where, as Mark Von Hagen shows, the new Bolshevik regime was compelled to wrestle repeatedly with the problem of how to salvage the logic of revolutionary mobilization while jettisoning what had always been its essential basis: the idea of the nation. Farther afield, as Greg Lockhart's account of the genesis of the People's Liberation Army of Vietnam shows, the persistence of traditional forms of social organization, coupled with the inevitable weakness of anticolonial, liberationist states, normally required that a revolutionary vanguard stand in for the *masse*, while justifying its enforced ascendancy on the grounds that it merely expressed universal values, and the still-inchoate desires of the people as a whole. In China, the subject of Arthur Waldron's chapter, the ideal of the nation in arms appealed to military intellectuals for reasons directly analogous to those that moved Prussia's reformers to seize upon the French Revolutionary model: because, properly domesticated, a citizen army would contribute simultaneously to the integration of society, the strengthening and modernization of the state, and the defense of the nation against outsiders.

The idea of the people in arms is one of the foundational elements of modern war. Its interaction with the other constituent elements of military modernity – professional officers, strong bureaucratic states, diversified industrial economies, and increasingly lethal weapons – has been exceptionally complex, if not paradoxical, a point that is further explored in Arthur Waldron's concluding remarks. In the West at least, the organizing power

of the state and the productive capacity of national economies have generally kept up with society's capacity to mobilize its citizens for war. Yet the citizen-soldier's chances of survival on a modern battlefield have been subject to deep discounting since at least the 1840s, when the introduction of rifled weapons transformed the training and command requirements of large armies, by compelling soldiers to disperse across an ever-expanding battlefield.

By the eve of the First World War, European military experts were convinced that the impending clash of arms, while intensely violent, would also necessarily be brief, because no belligerent could sustain the effort of modern war for long. The mass armies required to absorb the impact of new weapons were seen as incorporating a self-limiting social dynamic into war itself, whereby societies, once fully mobilized, would rapidly expend their energy, while losing cohesion in the process. It was without question the most calamitous strategic miscalculation of modern times: one based entirely upon social presumption rather than any real military calculation.

Yet it remains strangely liable to repetition. Although the legend of the *levée en masse* has, to all appearances, lost its grip upon the Western imagination, which invented it, its continued saliency for much of the rest of the world can scarcely be doubted. It is, as has been proposed, the characteristic resort of weak states and revolutionary regimes, with which the human community remains very well supplied. The chapters presented here describe its genesis and initial maturity. But they most certainly do not describe the full extent of its career, for the simple reason that its career is not over.