

The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars: New Approaches and Future Questions of Research

Workshop of the International research project, working group and network on “NATIONS, BORDERS, IDENTITIES: The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in European Experiences and Memories”

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No other armed conflict between the Thirty Years War and First World War so fundamentally and enduringly shaped Europe as the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815). They lasted for more than twenty years and encompassed the whole of Europe. In the current research project they will be regarded as the first world war, because they encompassed not only Europe, but also parts of Asia, Africa and the Americas. They were part of a struggle between France, Great Britain, Spain and the Netherlands to gain influence in the colonies, a struggle that was shaped by the conflict between the French and British Empires for maritime hegemony. Moreover, these wars were the first national wars fought by mass armies. This had wide reaching consequences for both military and civilian society. First, as a consequence of the extent of the wars the armies recruited men from the lower orders of society and introduced them to European regions far removed from their homes. Conversely, civilians came into contact with soldiers and officers from all over Europe, with their foreign languages and customs. Both had a lasting influence on images of the self, the foreign and the enemy. Secondly, these wars, which through intensive propaganda were increasingly presented as national wars appeared to reinforce the process of political and cultural nation-building. Thirdly, most of the belligerent powers would have been unable to wage war on this scale without the support of the civilian population. Assistance was required to clothe and arm the soldiers, to provide medical care for the sick and wounded, and to support those widowed by the war. As a result the relationship between the military and civilian society changed. The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars shaped the experiences and memories of many people, both men and women. It was because of this economic, political and societal impact that these wars played an important role in the collective memory of Europe, its regions and nations, well into twentieth century.

In the last few decades historical, social and cultural studies have increasingly dealt with issues of experience, recollection and memory. However, the main focus of research has until now been the twentieth century with its two world wars. In comparison, little research has been done on the nineteenth century, particularly on the period of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. The international research project *nations, Borders and Identities: The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in European Experiences and Memories*¹ will address

this gap. Its goal is to analyse the experiences and memories of the wars between 1792 and 1815 within a European comparative framework. This will include a series of workshops and conferences. As a prelude, the first workshop - entitled '*The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars: New Approaches and Future Questions of Research*' - was held on 1 November 2004 at Centre for Military History at Potsdam. It was organised by Karen Hagemann (University of Glamorgan) and Beatrice Hauser (Centre for Military History, Potsdam; Militärhistorisches Forschungsamt Potsdam) and financed by the MFGA. Forty academics from five countries participated in the conference to discuss the state of research, comparative European perspectives and questions of theory and method.

Charles Esdaile (University of Liverpool) provided an overview of the state of research in Europe. He emphasised that the 'French Wars' of 1792 to 1815 had been intensively researched since the nineteenth century, but that the research had been largely limited to the armies and their most important generals, the great battles and their heroes. There are also a number of good introductions to the history of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, which combine representation of military developments with analysis of foreign, domestic and economic relations. However, too little attention has been paid to the effects of the wars on different regions; and there is no unified history of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Until now both phases of war have, in general, been researched separately. The few studies which have examined the wars between 1792 and 1815 in a longer perspective demonstrate how productive this interpretation can be.

The focus of research in military history first began to change with the emergence of the journal *New Military History*, which posed questions about economic, social and cultural history. Today we are well-informed on organisational structures, functionary mechanisms, and the regional and social context of the British and French armies. But we lack parallel work on other participants in the wars, and little research has been done on the multiple effects which they had on the civilian population. The lack of studies on the relationship between the military and civilian society reflects the shortage of research on the historical experience of the wars between 1792 and 1815. For many European regions we still know very little about the everyday experiences of the men and women who participated in these wars, whether in the military or in civilian society. Furthermore, research on the historical memory of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars is still in its infancy. It has until now mainly concentrated upon two areas: national cults of death and national cultures of remembrance. It is predominantly about monuments and remembrance celebrations. Recently an increasing number of studies have examined collective remembrance of regional and national heroes and heroines of the wars – with a central role given over to memories of Napoleon.

In the papers that followed, various specialists analysed the state of research for individual European regions, which either participated in the wars or were extensively affected by them. *Alan Forrest* (University of York) in his report on the state of research in France referred to the wealth of literature on what has been seen as a particularly important period in French history. In France there has been work on the war experiences of French soldiers and officers, while in recent years, there have also been a number of regional studies that address the relationship between military and civilian society. However, there is still considerable room for new research. Many of the social and cultural questions that have guided research on the First World War in recent years should also be applied to the period of conflict between 1792 and 1815. We know little, for instance, about the cultural impact of violence, death and dying, mourning and loss, about the support the civilian population gave to those who avoided conscription or who deserted from the armies, or about the very different economic consequences the war had in different regions. Even for France there is no history of the experience of the war from the perspective of the civilian population. Such a history of experience could help to relativize many research hypotheses, which are based on an analysis of political, economic or social structures alone.

Jane Rendall (University of York) reached a similar conclusion for the state of research in Great Britain and Ireland. The military, social and political dimensions of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in Great Britain have also been extensively examined. There are also studies which look at both military and civilian society during the war years. However, there is a lack of research on experience and memory, and there has been no systematic comparison of the cultural and political impact of the wars upon the four British nations of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. Interesting questions include the emergence of the concept of the British nation, the process of national and regional identity formation and the promotion of patriotism. Any answers to these questions must include an imperial dimension and an awareness of the importance of the period for the formation of the British Empire.

Jane Rendall identified a further gap in the existing research on Britain; the lack of any historical works on gender. The changed relationship between the military and civilian society, which resulted from the war, also led to changes in gender relations. The two decades of war were not merely a period of widespread change in military systems or the restructuring of the state, economy and administration. They were also a time when perceptions of an 'adequate' gender order changed all over Europe, to be replaced by a 'middle-class model' that was based on the idea of 'natural' differences between the sexes. This development has already been closely analysed by Karen Hagemann for Prussia and can be applied to other regions within the context of the war. It was reinforced by general mobilisation, since a man's duty to protect his family and his homeland was coupled to political rights. Important gaps in the research on Britain include the spread of hero cults among the population and the multiple ways in which women became involved in the war effort. Although war experiences were shaped by gender, the collective memory of the period of conflict is largely male dominated. This theme – which not only applies to Great Britain – will also be examined in the project.

The state of research in Eastern Europe was analysed by *Ruth Leiserowitz* (Humboldt-University Berlin). The Russian and Polish historiography of the period of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars is, in comparison to western European countries, less developed and unbalanced. Moreover, research interests differ, since the period, which was shaped by Polish-Russian confrontation, was differently perceived and described in the two countries. In Russia the war of 1812 is remembered as the 'Great Patriotic War', a war of liberation, in which the Poles fought as allies of the French. In Poland, on the other hand, the same attitude is evident towards Russia and Prussia and the partitions of 1792, 1793 and 1795. These events, together with the formation of the Grand Duchy of Poland under French suzerainty between 1807 and 1815, represent a particularly important period in historical memory. As a result the historical treatment of the period in Russia and Poland has been conducted under very different national-historical circumstances. However, these differences conceal an essential agreement, since it is the military dimension that has been the primary focus of research. We know virtually nothing about the experiences women in either region, despite the fact there exist rich primary sources. Research into gender relations in the period around the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth century is in its infancy. It is because of the narrow approach of existing Polish and Russian history on this period that comparative and cross-national investigation is particularly important to fill the gaps in the research.

In his report on the state of research in *Spain and Portugal*, *Charles Esdaile* drew principally on his own work in which he reappraises the period of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in the Iberian Peninsula. The course of the war, the recruitment and organisation of the Spanish army, the war experiences of the soldiers and the effects and perceptions of the guerrilla conflict in Spain and Europe have all been relatively well researched. The most pressing research gaps now relate to the experiences of the civilian population, the gender dimension and the history of the memory of the war.

In his report on the oft-neglected countries of *Belgium and the Netherlands*, *Horst Carl* (Giessen University) spoke of a 'war-determined time of change in north-west Europe'. He emphasised the 'special position' of the two countries in continental Europe, a feature which

applies not only to the period itself and the experiences of contemporaries, but also to the memories of the conflict. The 'cathartic experience of a war of liberation' is lacking in both countries. Therefore, in neither Belgium nor the Netherlands are the war experiences inscribed in a culture of remembrance. The 'French period' has not really found a place within national-historical narratives. These exist parallel to each other and are strongly shaped by Anglo-American (Netherlands) or French (francophone Belgium) historiography. However, Carl sees considerable potential for research into historical comparisons of mentality and culture. Rich sources exist for this approach. In both countries an extraordinary amount of statistical documentation concerning national service and personal papers (both published and unpublished) has survived. Among these documents are many letters from ordinary soldiers that have been barely researched. These would be suitable for an investigation into mentalities, culture and experiences.

Finally, Michael Rowe (King's College, London) examined the state of research in the German-speaking regions. He indicated that the balance of research across the various regions within this territory is very uneven. This is largely due to the fact that any research has to confront the great economic, social and cultural differences within the area, the divisions between Protestant and Catholic regions, and the different political systems of territorial states of varying size that had very different political and military experiences of French invasion between 1792 and 1815. Rowe contrasted the growing number of regional political and social studies with the apparent lack of interest in economic and social history, and the history of everyday life (*Alltagsgeschichte*) and mentalities. There is also little comparative analysis of the memory of war that allows engagement with the very different and often contradictory traditions of remembrance.

Etienne François (Technical University of Berlin), *Jörn Leonhard* (University of Jena), *Matthias Middell* (University of Leipzig) and *Arnd Bauerkämper* (Berlin College for Comparative European History) commented at the concluding *round table* on the results of the workshop. At the heart of the discussion are the opportunities and limitations associated with the various approaches outlined earlier for a comparative history (*Vergleich*, *Transfer*, *histoire croisée*) of the experience and memory of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. It was unanimously agreed that such a project could only be successful if the theoretical and methodological approaches were very deliberately chosen and consistently reflected throughout the research. In order to meet the many challenges that the project will face, the different approaches (political, military, social, cultural and gender history) must be bound tightly together. *Etienne François* emphasised that there were many promising starting points for a multi-perspective approach. The examination of the experiences and memories of individuals, who were directly involved in the armed struggle, and whose lives, and therefore memories, were shaped by the wars, offers not only a focus that can encompass the various approaches, but also one that is supported by a good source base. The research reports given on the various European regions had referred to the last point. *Jörn Leonhard* raised the issue of a *longue-durée* perspective. As soon as possible the changes in perceptions, experiences and memories in the specific regional and historic contexts should be identified and the breaks, contradictions and turning-points in memory established. *Matthias Middell* reinforced *Etienne François's* earlier comments. He stressed that a *longue-durée* analysis of experience and memory must be openly interpreted since the wars were not only a period of violence and conflict, but simultaneously a time of encounter and exchange, of cultural transfer between the participating individuals, regions and nations. *Arnd Bauerkämper* noted that, while the collective memory of the wars was formed through the constant transfer between individual and group, region and nation, it was also shaped by the continual tension between different traditions of memory. The changes to regional and national borders during and after the wars of 1792 to 1815 makes the study of experiences and memories highly complex, but also ensures that it is an extraordinarily interesting subject for comparative European history.

The participants at the *round table* further agreed that the project for a history of experiences and memories of the period of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars also had great potential for a global history, which stretches beyond Europe, since the conflict itself was worldwide. Before a global research project on these wars could be begin, the research questions already discussed for Europe should be dealt with and the various theoretical and methodological approaches to comparison tested. Otherwise there is a possible danger of overload. The focus on Europe, however, should not suggest that every non-European reference will be ignored. This is impossible due to the interconnection of nation- and empire-building during the period. This was not only an important phenomenon for Great Britain, but also for France, Austria, Russia and Spain. Moreover it is impossible to understand the process of identity formation without the images of the 'other' and the 'foreign' outside of Europe and without the concrete experiences of soldiers and sailors of the 'foreign' during the war.

During the concluding discussion it was emphasised that the project cannot merely remain a summary of national and regional studies. This happens too often in large comparative projects, since despite all attempts to internationalise the writing of history it still remains shaped by national traditions and rooted in national contexts and academic cultures. This project will be aided by the construction of a network of scholars who will, through a series of research workshops, demonstrate which approaches are most suited to a European history of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.

1 The research network is directed by Karen Hagemann (Technical University of Berlin / after July 2005 University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Department of History) (project director), Arnd Bauerkämmer (Free University Berlin, Berliner College for European Comparative History), Richard Bessel (University of York, Department of History), Alan Forrest (University of York, Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies), Etienne François (Technical University Berlin, Centre for French Studies), Hartmut Kaelble (Humboldt University Berlin, Berliner College for European Comparative History) und Jane Rendall (University of York, Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies). The German Project Group will be funded from June 2005 onwards by the German Research Foundation.

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