

“Friends, Fellows, Citizens. and Soldiers”: The Evolution of the French Revolutionary Army, 1792-1799

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Few movements have changed the western world more than the French Revolution. The ways in which it affected Europe are often debated, but there is little disagreement that it *did* change the political, social, and economic climate of the time. It eroded monarchy, created a republic, had its share of dictatorship and propagandizing, challenged religious authority, and so much more. One thing that often gets lost in the bloody tumult of the storming of the Bastille, the execution of the king, the Terror, the rise of Napoleon and all the rest is the way that the military influenced the Revolution and was influenced by it. Indeed, the Revolutionary Army was a markedly different institution than the one under the Ancien Régime and even the one that Napoleon used to conquer much of Europe. It evolved with the Revolution and mirrored its successes and failures, victories and losses. It began as a fragmented force decimated by revolution and ended victorious on a wave of patriotism and professionalism. It changed the way wars were fought, both on the field and on the home front, and was a political tool that shaped politics by its own actions. Without the Revolutionary Army guarding the frontiers and later fighting outside of France, there is little doubt that the Revolution itself would have failed quickly.

The Revolutionary Army was born in the fiery crucible of the Revolution's earliest days, inheriting many of its characteristics from the armies of the Ancien Régime. Louis XIV had set France on the path to military greatness by creating a veteran army that had gained experience from fighting his many costly wars. Modern quips about the French military prowess often forget that the French armies of the 17th and 18th centuries were some of the most formidable fighting forces in the entire world and were not to be trifled with, because the Revolution injured that tradition. By the time the French Revolutionary government declared war on Austria on April 20, 1792, most of Louis XVI's officers had fled France, leaving the army listless and barely in a cohesive state. Indeed, John A. Lynn estimates in his timeless military history of the Revolution, *The Bayonets of the Republic*, that “nearly 60 percent of all officers” had left France since the Revolution had begun.¹ Part of the blame here lies with the monarchy and how it recruited its officers. Military commissions were a gentlemen's pursuit, but they could also be bought for a price. The selling of all sorts of positions, military or otherwise, was rampant in the courts of the Ancien Régime and so the officer corps' mass exodus from France naturally coincided with that of the aristocrats. Not all aristocrats were officers, but all officers were aristocrats.

Few competent officers remained in the French military during the Revolution's early days, and there were even fewer skilled men to be led as desertion became rampant. Jean-Baptiste Rochambeau, hero of the American Revolution, was one of the few seasoned officers who remained under arms when the government deposed the king. When war was declared, he determined based on prior experience that the French army was utterly incapable of fighting a war. Indeed, he opposed any advances into the Austrian Netherlands, which the Assembly demanded, as “even his line troops [the regular, professional troops] needed more training before they could face the excellent Hapsburg troops.”² After a disastrous advance into the Netherlands, which resulted in the murder of officers for attempting to stop fleeing soldiers, Rochambeau resigned, causing France to lose one of its great military minds, though not before imprisoning him as a traitor. Rochambeau's experiences demonstrate how in the first years of the Revolution, France was unable to successfully fight a war due to its crippled and ineffective military. The military setbacks of 1792 across the frontier demonstrated the growing pains in France. Like society at large, the military was moving from its monarchical roots to something decidedly different, which was not an easy task.

One must wonder how the army that numbered only about 130,000 in 1792 would swell to a force of 600,000 by 1794 – a number that far surpassed all of its enemies combined – as well as how this army was organized. Alan Forrest, professor of modern history at the University of York and author of *Conscripts and Deserters: The Army and French Society During the Revolution and Empire*, shows how political machination and patriotic fervor mixed with a very new and revolutionary idea, promoted by the state, which helped facilitate this transformation. While the call for volunteers in the early stages of the war helped to increase the army's manpower through patriotic zeal, patriotism became more than an individual love of country. Forrest holds that “the *levée en masse* meant much more than a simple call to patriotism. It included a direct appeal to civic virtue and public responsibility.”³ The *levée en masse* conscripted

¹ John A. Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791-94* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1984), 4.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ Alan I. Forrest, *Conscripts and Deserters: The Army and French Society during the Revolution and Empire* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989), 31.

hundreds of thousands of Frenchmen of all ages and backgrounds into much-needed battalions, mostly infantry, and eventually trained them to become an effective fighting force that could stand in battle against Austrian, Prussian, and English troops. The *levée en masse* was the revolutionary government's most radical method of raising armies, but it was not the state's first attempt at mass motivation. In each year of the Revolutionary Wars, the government called for hundreds of thousands of volunteers, with varying degrees of success. The system of calling volunteers was not a new one: the kings of the Ancien Régime often called for volunteers and likewise often received mixed results. In order to bolster the ranks Louis XIV frequently hired foreign mercenaries, a choice the Revolutionaries did not support. After all, France and its ideals were for Frenchmen, and therefore Frenchmen must be the ones to defend the motherland.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen's universalizing ethos was put into military practice with the *levée*. Like Louis XIV and his successors, the National Assembly and Committees were unwilling to call upon the militias, as it was "a highly unpopular practice that routinely dragged young men away from their farms and workshops for six years at a time. The militia system was seen as unfair and divisive, a kind of lottery [as only some members were called into service] in which an individual's future and self-respect were callously gambled away."⁴ While the whole of the French male population was mobilized for war from an ideological standpoint, its existing institutional capabilities were diametrically opposed to the recruiting methods of the Ancien Régime. Even more worryingly, those methods were practically breaking down as well.

With these obstacles to recruitment plaguing an already diminished military and the war going poorly, the Assembly turned to drastic measures in 1794: the *levée*. The state, however, made a distinction in their beliefs that made their army-building effort radically new; instead of merely conscripting individuals, the Assembly focused on the current needs of the Revolution and the state.⁵ With the Austrians and Prussians pressing close in some parts of France, the Revolution itself was in jeopardy. Instead of shrinking from this dire fact, the politicians decided to use the circumstances as a call to arms, a rallying cry for the people. It converted much of the nation's citizenry and resources into military service and material support of the army. The *levée* also put the entire French people under the control of the state and "all were equal before the recruiting-sergeant, even if they were not wanted for active service" because "the Republic itself was compared to a city under siege, and the territory of France a huge military camp."⁶ Every Frenchman between the ages of eighteen and forty-five was obliged to serve the Revolution; recruit came into line with the Revolution's wider ideological impetus. The Revolution saw the individual become more than just a peasant or an artisan; they were now tools to be used by the state.⁷ Lynn shows how this equality of service, specifically military service, was becoming universal, as "eighty-four percent of the levy came from the rural villages and sixteen percent from towns and cities – the same breakdown of rural-urban population that typified France as a whole."⁸

No longer did the urban underclasses defend all the people of France; now all of France was represented and under arms due to their newfound obligation to their government, their Revolution, and their country. Macgregor Knox points out that the troops were now not social outcasts (as they were prior) but "our friends, fellows, citizens, and soldiers of the *Partie*"⁹ as the Revolutionary journalist Camille Desmoulins called them.⁹ The *levée* was so steeped in rhetoric and patriotism that the men compelled into its service were still called volunteers, despite the fact that they were blatantly being conscripted. The responses to conscription were varied. As one conscript noted, "the law carried me to arms to defend my *Partie*, which is dear to me; for her I left my family and fellow citizens..." and all soldiers, no matter how they came to be in the army, would share the experience that "in these attacks, often one forgets, on both sides, all humanity."¹⁰ France was now a nation of Frenchmen and its defense was therefore a burden for which they all must be responsible. Though the war was often brutal on those directly involved, the belief in shared responsibility for the nation was soon made literal by the nation-wide *levée*; it spread like wildfire throughout the military and reshaped it at its very foundation – the men. Duty, glory, sacrifice, and suffering were now for all Frenchmen, not just the elites and those of the Parisian slums who were forced by the King's men to serve. Citizen-soldiers were no longer the subjects of philosophical speculation; they were a reality that was heartily embraced by the majority of the French people.

⁴Forrest, *Conscripts and Deserters*, 10.

⁵Daniel Moran and Arthur Waldron, *The People in Arms: Military Myth and National Mobilization since the French Revolution* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 2003), 20.

⁶Forrest, *Conscripts and Deserters*, 14.

⁷Moran and Waldron, *The People in Arms*, 25.

⁸Lynn, *Bayonets of the Republic*, 57.

⁹MacGregor Knox, *The Dynamics of Military Revolution: 1300 - 2050* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 2001), 65. Quoting Desmoulins.

¹⁰Delaporte, "Campagne de l'an II," 389, as quoted in Lynn, *Bayonets of the Republic*, 179.

At least, that is what the popular image of the army in the Revolutionary heartland would suggest. While for many areas of France this narrative holds true, in those parts of France that had historically been more peripheral to the formerly absolutist *metropole*, the *levée* provoked feelings contrary to everything the Revolutionary government attempted to propagate. In the raucous coastal area of the Vendée, the imposition of the *levée* resulted in full revolt by Royalist and counterrevolutionary factions, sparking one of the most devastating civil wars in French history.¹¹ The history of the Vendée is fraught to say the least, but it must be noted that the revolt began directly as a result of the Revolutionary government's attempt to create a universal military system.¹² While the Vendée saw the largest uprisings, the transition to the *levée* system was a source of friction in many areas in France.¹³ The fact that the *levée* was instituted as smoothly and comprehensively as it was turned failure into success, and the Vendée was eventually pacified.

However, while the radical *levée en masse* redefined the relationship between the state and its people, it also gave the military hundreds of thousands of raw recruits who needed to be armed and supplied. While the *levée* revitalized the military in terms of recruits, it also put unimaginable strain on an already decrepit, floundering economy. According to Forrest, finding enough uniforms to clothe the army was difficult due to France's pre-industrial state, also the reason for the limited production of other military supplies and weaponry.¹⁴ To combat increased shortages caused by the influx of men, new industries were created virtually out of nothing by government mandates. Much of Paris and other urban areas ramped up military production to prodigious scales. Forrest cites a striking example in which an armory's pre-*levée* musket barrel output was 600 per year, which later skyrocketed to over 145,000 by September 1793.¹⁵ The demands for military supplies shattered French social and economic norms in an unprecedented manner. Many of these industries relied on artisans, who became idolized by the Revolutionaries due to their contribution to the war effort, in contrast to their low status under the Old Regime. Likewise, women also took up tasks to help meet the military's requirements, fashioning uniforms for hours a day or scraping the floors of cellars in search of the precious saltpeter used to make gunpowder.¹⁶

The Revolutionary government mandated almost all of these actions, and, as is to be expected, steeped them in patriotic rhetoric in the hope that the unruly public would cooperate. How successful this rhetoric truly was in terms of mass manipulation is debatable. When leading Girondists like Jacques Pierre Brissot stated in 1792 that "the French have become the most noteworthy people in the universe; their conduct must now correspond to their new destiny" – a destiny that would require war and sacrifice – one must wonder how responsive the average French family would have been.¹⁷ The revolutionary Baron de Cloots, speaking in favor of the coming war in 1792, said that "the French are lions, and would defend themselves in a manner that would leave no man alive nor tree standing; they would bury themselves under the ruin of their great houses and peasant hovels..." Would the average Frenchman be inspired to such an extent as to wholeheartedly embrace military service, hearing such grim verbiage?¹⁸ De Cloots also said in the same speech, which received raucous applause in the Assembly, "the soil of France would be enslaved [if they were defeated], but [the French] would die free, together with [their] wives, children and flocks..."¹⁹ One thing became blatantly clear during the opening acts of the Revolutionary Wars: that these were total wars and defeat for France would mean the destruction of the French nation. To be sure of this, the politicians may have wanted to provide the common folk with no way out, but even so, the Allied cause against France was also intense. The other truth of the matter was that the French people cooperated, fought, worked, and sacrificed for the military, which benefited greatly from their support. Perhaps one could have been particularly committed to the Revolution, but many may have just been practical in their support. After all, hundreds of thousands of their sons, husbands, fathers, and brothers were now in the military.

Rhetoric and ideology did more than increase the size of the military. Almost instantaneously after declaring hostilities in 1792, the war became intensely political. The Assembly and later the Committee of Public Safety both had their eyes fixed squarely on the military. It is this fixation between military and politics that best displays the constant mutual flexibility of the Revolutionary institutions. The politicization of the military, while a major factor in the average Frenchman's life as described above, was also a major issue that the government at times wrestled with and

¹¹ Donald M. G. Sutherland, *The French Revolution and Empire: The Quest for a Civic Order* (Paris: Blackwell Publishing France, 2003), 155.

¹² See the controversy over Reynald Secher's (2003) work, which claims that the Vendée was witness to genocide.

¹³ Sutherland, *The French Revolution and Empire*, 156.

¹⁴ Forrest, *Conscripts and Deserters*, 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Jacques Brissot. *Archive Parlementaires de 1789 à 1860*, vol. 35.(Paris, France, 1867-1980), 411..

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

at other times manipulated. The success of one often depended on the success of the other. While one may often try to separate “military” from “governmental” and both from “revolutionary,” one must see that both were revolutionary in their own ways and were irreconcilably intertwined. Generals rose and fell with their political backers and a military setback could destroy a political career. The French army was political from the very outset of the Revolution. Indeed, as Jean Paul Bertaud states in *The Army of the Revolution: From Citizen-Soldier to Instrument of Power*, in the opening acts of the war “if [the Army] lost a battle, the Revolution would be overturned and the king restored to his former powers. If it won, its success might give disturbing ideas to some generals. Caesarism might result from the war.”²⁰ As such, politicians became heavily invested in the military’s every move because of this paradox; military loss could destroy the Revolution, but so could victory.

Many politicians saw military success and support as the guiding principles of their public careers. While modern thinkers may view this as an obvious concern all politicians should have, it was an obligation that was completely alien to the new and idealistic Revolutionary politicians. Previously, the king merely demanded funds and men to fight his wars. Now, without such an institution in place, politicians had to step up and manage a military that was not just larger than any king’s but also far more complex and in a far more dire situation. Victories on the battlefield meant a more stable and secure France that was free of monarchy. Ironically, it was often the confused hysteria caused by the Revolutionary Wars’ many setbacks in the Netherlands and the Rhineland that enabled the Revolutionary government to institute its more radical agendas. When it seemed as if its entire grand experiment was doomed to fail, the government passed all sorts of legislation that scholars deem revolutionary.²¹ In theory and in practice the Army provoked governmental and institutional change due to its victories and defeats. Later on there were changes made because of the army’s defeats. Danger caused the Terror and its revolutionary movements, but in the end “Robespierre’s Comité had conducted the war far too well for their own good. The victory of Fleurus [a major victory that finally allowed the French to seize the Netherlands] removed the *raison d’être* for Robespierre’s government” and its bloody excesses.²²

It is vital to reiterate that change occurred in two ways: as the military changed the Revolution in terms of government, so too did the government change the military. The drastic change in demographics and democratization in the military has already been discussed, but the Revolution’s insistence on political and military merit also changed military life forever. Generals were required to perform competently and with skill. Those who led poorly, dishonored the Revolution on the battlefield, or held “incorrect” political beliefs were more often than not recalled to Paris, which was usually the sign of either dismissal or the guillotine. Naturally, one’s chances were significantly worse if one were an aristocrat, as aristocratic generalship terrified most Revolutionary leaders. This was not completely groundless as some of the most prominent generals of the Old Regime who supported the defunct constitutional monarchy proved unreliable, if not opposed to the new order. After all, the Revolutionary Army’s first attempt at a political action occurred when the Marquis de Lafayette, upon hearing of Louis XVI’s attempted escape and imprisonment, planned on marching on Paris with the Armée du Nord. Prior to doing this, the trans-Atlantic icon attempted to have his army renew their oath to the king; however, they refused partly due to Parisian pamphlets describing what republicanism would mean for them. This resulted in Lafayette fleeing to the Austrian Netherlands.²³ The newly founded government was dismayed but not shocked, as many had always seen Lafayette as a monarchist aristocrat.

The hatred of aristocratic officers was now ingrained in the government and military psyche to the extent that politicians began to take drastic steps not only to monitor officers and keep them in line, but to direct the military’s actions. Government oversight increased exponentially after the moderate Charles François Dumouriez, who led the Nord and participated in many famous operations, including the Battle of Valmy, defected to the Austrians in 1793 to save himself from his radical enemies. Indeed, the new Ministry of War in 1793 instructed its *commissaire du conseil executive* and “representatives on mission,” who were little more than political officers and spies, that:

...you ought to be thoroughly convinced of the importance of your mission, on which can be depended the safety of the Republic. The agent of the [Executive] Council is the eye of the minister with the armies in order to discover all treasons, intrigues, and abuses.

The agent of the Council ought especially to devote himself to knowing the spirit and principles of the general...if they have been public or private partisans of the tyranny and of the factions which have succeeded it, and that the people have overthrown.

²⁰ Jean Paul Bertaud, *The Army of the French Revolution: From Citizen-soldiers to Instrument of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1988), 14.

²¹ The official abolition of the French monarchy, for example, was terminated the day after the Battle of Valmy.

²² Owen Connelly, *The Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon, 1792-1815* (London: Routledge, 2006), 65.

²³ Lynn, *Bayonets of the Republic*, 6 and 122 for more detailed description of Lafayette’s treason and the influence of pamphlets on Lafayette’s army, respectively.

Equally, he ought to find out if there exists in the headquarters staff or among the officers of the particular units former nobles, men who had been attached to the service of tyrants or the creatures of *Lafayette*, *Dumouriez*, *Custine*, *Houchard*, *Biron*, *Brunet*, and other generals, who manifest opinions contrary to liberty, equality, and the unity and indivisibility of the Republic.²⁴

Soon, every army had its detachments of *commissaire du conseil* who were busily reporting back to Paris of poor performance and counterrevolutionary activity. Many officers were dismissed or executed on evidence that could be true or completely groundless. John Lynn holds that “anxious authorities faced a dilemma: a choice between professional competence and political reliability. Recognizing the need to maintain a sufficient level of technical capacity, Paris opted to retain skilled personnel...”²⁵ This, however, did little to assuage the fear of counterrevolutionary or incompetent generalship. Good officers were dismissed or killed for bad politics while bad officers were dismissed or killed for bad leadership in the rampant purges. The *Armée du Nord*, for example, had twenty-four generals in six years. The Revolutionaries’ intense political oversight of the military hampered it by instilling paranoia and fear in its officers. This fear was understandable, as they faced a unique problem: defeat often meant dismissal or execution, but cautious actions invited accusations of counterrevolutionary tendencies, with similar end results for the officer in question. However, this tendency to purge the army also helped the military in the end by awarding the abundance of vacant upper-echelon jobs to those who proved themselves to be truly capable and worthy, as was the case with Napoleon.

The swell of public support and recruits – volunteers and conscripts – led to some decisive organizational issues for the military. With tens, if not hundreds of thousands of men moving from civilian life to military life, whole armies had to be built from the ground up. What should the government do with all this new manpower? How does one train an army of citizen-soldiers when the army previously relied on mercenaries and professionals, and therefore lacked any real mass training institutions? And how does the army manage the professionals who remain? Can they be trusted to uphold the new political order, or must one risk gutting military competence for the sake of political stability? For that matter, the military also faced an issue of how to organize itself to fit the current political climate, that is, how to make itself truly “republican” in nature. All of these concerns were vital for France and its leaders since without a successful military, the Revolution could have been crushed by the old monarchical powers.

One certainty is that this new military could not be mistaken for Louis XIV’s army. In terms of demographics, it already had changed in many drastic ways, but its organization had not changed to match this new shift in manpower. The old regular regiments kept their integrity despite experiencing a desertion crisis. The new volunteers and conscripts formed their own units after hastily being handed muskets and uniforms, when either was available. At the outset of hostilities, the difference between these two classes of soldiers could not have been more profound. The regulars had been soldiers for years and had served under the king. They still wore the king’s white uniforms because the law that had outlawed them “had gone unenforced,” despite revolutionary leader Georges Danton’s insistence.²⁶ The volunteers were to wear republican blue when they could be equipped with proper uniforms, which only emphasized and exacerbated the differences between the new and old soldiers. In a move that was considered to be scandalous and infuriated the radically republican *sans-culottes* in the volunteer battalions, the regulars kept their old, royally imparted regimental names. The regulars were generally more reliable and better equipped than their newer counterparts and as such performed better in action. Even so, French units performed worse overall than their Germanic counterparts in the opening moves in the Netherlands and Rhineland. Despite this, the regulars were preferred over the generally unreliable, untested recruits who formed the new Revolutionary units.

This led to another unique problem. In order to ensure success, the troops needed to be up to par with their adversaries, a trait only the regulars could even dare to boast of. However, there were no formal training institutions outside of unit drill sergeants for the new men to make them like the regulars. As a result, they were forced to learn by doing – literally, trial by fire. This quickly built new soldiers’ battle experience, but putting the new units at the front risked instability among the troops and increased the chances of defeat or rout. The few massed drills Rochambeau performed in 1792 “apparently proved disappointing... Much had to be done that winter, as the volunteer battalions joined the regulars.”²⁷ Lynn posits that even though the “volunteers of 1792 increased the size of the Nord [150 new battalions joined the Nord over a mere six months]... at first they hardly added to its strength,” because they were so underprepared to face the enemy.²⁸

²⁴ Bonnal des Ganges, *Les représentants du peuple*, I:131. As quoted in Lynn, 85.

²⁵ Lynn, *Bayonets of the Republic*, 67.

²⁶ Connelly, *French Revolution and Napoleon*, 43.

²⁷ Lynn, *Bayonets of the Republic*, 220.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 224.

To address this problem, the Committee of Public Safety, again acting for the military, decided to undertake the *amalgame* in 1793, which aimed to “integrate the ranks – and make regulars, volunteers, and, later, conscripts brothers in arms” and “break up units of the royal army, and reduce the threat of a military coup against the Republic” as well as surround the new troops with steady, experienced men.²⁹ It also aimed to decrease tensions between the career soldiers and the rambunctious, ill-disciplined volunteers who saw the professionals as unpatriotic.³⁰ Morale, especially after so many failures on the battlefield in the Netherlands and Rhineland, needed to be improved. Fortunately for the military and the Revolution, General Custine was able to whip French forces into shape by establishing training camps that saw select men from each unit go to train for weeks and then return to impart their newly-acquired knowledge on their peers.³¹ This proved to be highly successful as Custine’s *commissaires*, Varin and Celliez, reported that “the soldiers devote themselves to drill with indefatigable zeal, and the great number of battalions maneuver with a precision that one does not see in troops of the line.”³² The Revolutionary Army was starting to become a potent force due to Custine’s reforms, though he was later guillotined in one of the Committee’s purges.

The *amalgame* was delayed until 1794 so as not to impede combat operations as it did more than just change the veteran to recruit ratio. Indeed, the *amalgame* broke apart all army units and reformed them into large “*demi-brigades* of three battalions, with companies of forty volunteers and twenty regulars,” who were always in short supply.³³ These *demi-brigades* were to be singular operational units and proved to be very flexible in combat. The veterans steadied the recruits and imparted much-needed wisdom. They also standardized the army’s units; no longer would generals like Custine find, upon examining his units, “line battalions of sixty men, some with two hundred or one hundred fifty.”³⁴ This made the generals’ jobs easier since they no longer had to fear that a unit’s pre-combat strength on paper was different than its strength in reality. The *amalgame* restructured these units so that there was little such confusion.

Demi-brigades also heralded an age of mass warfare. They were the smallest units available to operational commanders, and with a hefty strength of slightly more than 2,400 men and four cannons, they operated well on their own and in formation with other units. They could cover more ground due to their size and attack more fiercely (in theory) than their Ancien Regime counterparts. The size of the Revolutionary *Demi-Brigade* reflects the massive amount of men available to the French and the government’s commitment to winning a challenging war. This reorganization and commitment was heavily needed, as the Revolutionary Armies of 1792 and 1793 simply were not up to the tasks at hand. They were under-trained, if trained at all, under-equipped with some units equipped only with pikes, and outperformed by their adversaries.

There existed and still exists an idea in the French military that Frenchmen, being the passionate, fiery men that they are, possessed and still possesses a military *élan*, tenacity in the offensive.³⁵ This naturally enthroned the charge of the bayonet as the dominant French tactic in battle as using musket fire was seen as contrary to French character and overall too defensive. When shortages of firearms crippled the army, the pike, seen as a suitably French weapon, was issued since it was similar to the bayonet, cheap, and had a successful history dating back to medieval times.³⁶ This obsession with suiting tactics to French character, carried out as part of the Revolution’s ideal of a French identity, compelled the Committee of Public Safety, micromanaging to a staggering degree, to command its officers on February 2, 1794 that “the general rule is always to act in mass and on the offensive, keep the troops ever on alert, seize every opportunity to employ the bayonet, and pursue the enemy until his complete destruction.”³⁷

It was this fervent belief in the offensive – the *élan* of the Frenchman – that made the column the formation of choice in battle. The column was a formation defined by the Revolution as “its characteristic offensive tactic.”³⁸ In essence a long phalanx of men and glistening steel, the column stressed charging and could only be used effectively when on the assault. The traditional formation for musket-armed infantry, the line, was still implemented, especially as a holding formation and in defensive operations, where it proved very capable. The line was a more challenging formation that demanded strict discipline to use in the attack and so it was often shunned in favor of the more

²⁹ Connelly, *French Revolution and Napoleon*, 43.

³⁰ Bertaud, *Army of the French Revolution*, 151.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 155 and Connelly, 60.

³² Varin and Celliez, letter to Paris, *Archives de la guerre*, June 1793 as quoted by Lynn, 230.

³³ Connelly, *French Revolution and Napoleon*, 43.

³⁴ Caustine, report to Paris, *Archives de la guerre*, May, 28, 1793 as quoted by Lynn, 229.

³⁵ Charles W. Sanders’ *No Other Law: The French Army and the Doctrine of the Offensive* (1987) excellently shows how the idea of *élan* continued to influence French military thinking well into the twentieth century.

³⁶ Lynn, *Bayonets of the Republic*, 189-91.

³⁷ Committee of Public Safety, February 2, 1794, as quoted by Bertaud, 231.

³⁸ Lynn, *Bayonets of the Republic*, 251.

simplistic, but effective, column.³⁹ The column was a simple battering ram that required little real drilling, but required much zeal, something that the volunteers definitely possessed. Indeed, it was very common to have generals issue orders like those General Kléber issued in May 1794 which stressed that “attacks will be made in column... the bayonet lowered.”⁴⁰

The Revolution, stressing individualism and meritocracy, not only enabled officers to rise in rank based on performance, but also saw the numbers of irregular troops – skirmishers – increase dramatically. Fighting in loose formation and acting on initiative, they were individuals fighting in a system that often stressed the unit.⁴¹ While this was partially due to a lack of general discipline, they came to symbolize another aspect of French character and were also surprisingly effective in battle. Skirmishers laid the groundwork for personal action on the battlefield.

Zeal could hardly win battles by itself. The myth that it was masses of untrained but patriotic sans-culottes that stopped the destruction of the Republic is just that, a myth. The volunteers of 1792 and 1793 failed in most of their battles and campaigns not due to a lack of courage, but from a lack of general ability. However, losses in these campaigns were usually small, considering the massive number of men participating in them; and slowly but surely, the soldiers gained experience. It was this experience, gained through the numerous advances into and subsequent retreats from the Netherlands and the Rhineland, which gave the armies their capability to perform on the battlefield and eventually conquer those areas. The Battle of Valmy in 1792 was depicted as the major victory of righteous citizen-soldiers over the hated slaves of the monarchists. While Valmy did save the Revolution in its worst year of the war (Paris lay scant miles from the Austro-Prussian rear while the French rearguard faced the German frontier), it was not won purely on the volunteers’ merit. In reality, nothing could be farther from the truth. The infantry engagement that started the battle and saw the volunteers charge with bayonets was short and completely indecisive. It was the artillery duel, which the French were winning, that eventually convinced the Coalition forces to retreat. The artillery – the branch of the military that required the most learning, training, and professionalism, and which had seen negligible amounts of revolutionaries fill its ranks – proved to be the effective and decisive force on the battlefield at Valmy and in later engagements. It was the professionals of Louis XVI’s royal army who, ironically, saved the Revolution in 1792.⁴²

That said, as the Revolution and its wars progressed, so did its military forces. The raw volunteers of 1792-3 and the conscripts of the *levée en masse* slowly gained experience and became hardened soldiers, despite their numerous strategic defeats. Eventually this experience, which was gained in both defeat and victory, enabled the Army to outfight its enemies by 1797. The Revolution had made itself felt in the military: it had reorganized it, increased its size, reconfigured its values, and made it a merit-based system. Likewise, the Army itself had affected the Revolution by giving it an outlet and something to carefully mold. Its successes and failures changed the political climate, what Revolutionary leaders were concerned with, and what they could get away with. It channeled what the French saw as their national character and the zeal to protect that character. Most important, it protected the Republic, and by the closing of the War of the First Coalition in 1797 the Revolutionary Army had become experienced enough to defeat its enemies in the field. The Army represented both a revolution in the military and a military revolution in its own right. The Revolution was saved by the blood, tenacity, and merit of the Revolutionary Army, forever changing Europe in the process.

³⁹ Lynn, *Bayonets of the Republic*, 247.

⁴⁰ Kléber, orders to Armée de Ardennes, *Archives de la guerre*, May 1794, as quoted by Lynn, 253.

⁴¹ Bertaud, *Army of the French Revolution*, 234-235.

⁴² Connelly, *French Revolution and Napoleon*, 31.

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