

Jennifer Ngaire Heuer. *The Soldier's Reward: Love and War in the Age of the French Revolution and Napoleon*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2025. Pp. xii +365.

Should soldiers marry? This question runs through *The Soldier's Reward*, in which Jennifer Heuer ably weaves political, social and cultural histories of military service from the Old Regime to the Restoration. The issue was already under debate in enlightened circles in the decades preceding the Revolution, as discussed in chapter 1. The naturalist Jean-Baptiste Robinet argued that soldiering was incompatible with family life: "A bachelor soldier has married war" (33). He was opposed by Voltaire and Louis-Sébastien Mercier: without someone to fight for, soldiers degenerated into vagabond mercenaries. As the former expressed it, "Tied to their families, they will also be tied to their patrie" (35). The Crown, worried about economic obligations to soldiers' dependents, did not agree.

The Revolution transformed the situation. Soldiers were now citizens who had rights including, once past their majority (reduced to twenty-one), the right to marry. The surge of 'volunteers' in 1792-93 also brought thousands of married men into the armed forces. Given the Republic's inability to meet its own promises about supporting the families of absent soldiers, many of volunteers' wives accompanied them, sometimes in uniform themselves. Such women were, according to Lazare Carnot, a drain on resources and morale, and they were mostly expelled in April 1793, in what Heuer calls the "first demobilization" (65) of the revolutionary wars.

A more significant demobilization, numerically speaking, was the quiet but systematic discharge of married men throughout the rest of the decade. In chapter 3, Heuer examines thousands of petitions from serving soldiers, their parents and wives, insisting that their loved-ones had fulfilled their duty, and that they could now best serve the Republic by becoming economically productive and thus provide for their families. As Heuer argues, citizenship was envisaged less as individual than as familial, with rights and duties distributed between different members. Even before the introduction of conscription in 1798, the Republic's army had become demographically homogeneous, made up of young, adult, male bachelors.

And they were kept as bachelors. In the Napoleonic army, soldiers needed their officers' consent to marry, and officers required written permission from the Minister of War. As they were dependent on patriarchal authority, soldiers were reduced to the status of women, their rights as citizens suspended, as some royalist pamphleteers were quick to point out. Marriage had to be postponed until peace – a retreating prospect – or

the soldier's discharge, usually for medical reasons. Marriage then became a reward for their completed service. The state actively promoted such ideas, most dramatically by sponsoring mass weddings of veterans, celebrated on various Napoleonic feast-days, with the benevolently parental Emperor himself furnishing dowries to provide a start for the new families. (The money did not always materialize.)

As Heuer shows in chapter 6, these festivities generated mixed responses. It was difficult to find men and women who were both willing and suitable. Were the dowries a reward or a disguised form of charity? Given that discharged soldiers were often physically impaired, how attractive were they as spouses? The Republic had regularly paraded wounded veterans to incite patriotic emotions. Such public displays were less frequent under the Empire because they were counter-productive. But even if veterans were physically capable, might they not be morally corrupted by their nomadic life, and brutalized by experiences of violence? And as a character in an 1801 play asked, "Can soldiers remain faithful?" (167) when they were used to making conquests, in the bedroom as on the battlefield.

These issues were aired in political debates, pamphlets and petitions, but also in popular culture. Throughout the book Heuer uses theatre to document changes in expectations about soldiers' familial arrangements. There are hundreds of play-texts to choose from. Plots were formulaic and often rehashed, but this very repetition, which Heuer terms "cultural recycling", enables the historian to spot subtle shifts from one year to another in the treatment of soldiers, deserters, draft-dodgers, hired replacements (an arrangement permitted by the 1798 conscription law), parents, love-rivals, wives and children.

Plays were subject to censorship and so were a more-or-less subtle form of propaganda. Can we be certain that they reflect popular understandings of soldiering? It is clear from Heuer's other main source - petitions - that the public at all social levels, or at least the writers they employed, learnt to couch their appeals in discourses promoted by political elites, and thus they also echo the themes and language performed on stage.

The final chapters cover the demobilization after the Empire's downfall. Royalists depicted Napoleon as an unnatural father, a Saturn who consumed his own children, an Abraham whose hand was not stayed. Napoleonic conscription created an "unnatural order", in which mothers feared to have sons or hoped they would be born too weak to be conscripted (264). 1814 witnessed an outpouring of images of grateful mothers whose boys had been saved from the Minotaur of war. Another aspect of this "unnatural order" were the thousands of young men who

had wed women past child-bearing age to escape conscription, especially in 1813, and who now sought to free themselves. Such arrangements posed a problem to the Restoration authorities, committed as they were to re-sacralizing marriage.

This was not the only problem they faced. How could families mourn millions of dead sons, especially given that there were no commemorative sites of memory? What could be done about the thousands who were missing? And returning soldiers – alternately treated as heroes in the wrong cause or as an ongoing threat to the social and political order – were still subject to the 1808 decree limiting their right to marry. In theory even veterans still required their officers' permission, which was unobtainable given that most army units had been disbanded. The colossal legacy of the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars and their impact on family life were impossible for the Bourbons to resolve. On the other hand, the reintroduction of conscription in 1818 demonstrated that new forms of state power could survive regime change.

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