

## Did the survival of the French Republic up to 1799 owe more to its own efforts or the conduct of its enemies?

The first battle of the French Revolutionary Wars, that of Valmy, proved to be a remarkable turning point in the fortunes of the patriotic concept. After the humiliations endured by the Dutch patriots in 1787 at the hands of the Prussians, and the crushing reconquest of Belgium in 1790 by the Austrians, the European powers had developed only contempt for the 'amateurs' who made up ideological or quasi-ideological armies. Yet the defeat of the powerful and hitherto unthinkable coalition of Germany's leading states - Prussia, Austria and Hesse-Kassel - proved to be a major shock to the *ancien régime* balance of power. Where just a few months beforehand, the threat contained in the Duke of Brunswick's manifesto, of '*une exécution militaire et une subversion totale*'<sup>1</sup> had sounded such notes of alarm in Paris as to encourage massacres of potential Fifth-Columnists in the prisons, the total subversion had in fact been meted out on the invading powers. As the Prussian Colonel von Massenbach put it: 'The French revolutionaries have come through their baptism by fire. They have expected more from us. Now we have fallen in their estimation, but they have risen. We have lost more than a battle. Our credibility is gone.'<sup>2</sup> However, a loss of credibility did not necessarily imply anything more than a temporary defeat, while continued war placed as much strain on the workings of the newly national French military machine as it did on the allies'.

What Valmy had proved beyond any reasonable doubt was that numerical superiority genuinely did transpose into victory. Certainly Valmy did not require any significant test of the fighting ability of the newly-swollen French army, since Brunswick refused to give battle on the slopes of Mount Yron - '*hier schlagen wir nicht*'.<sup>3</sup> As Clausewitz said in his critique on the Revolutionary Wars, 'the first rule therefore should be: put the largest possible army into the field; the best strategy is always *to be very strong* first in general then at the decisive point.'<sup>4</sup> This rule the French Revolutionary armies managed consistently to put into practice where their *ancien régime* opponents failed. The campaign which led to Valmy itself is an extremely good demonstration of this, with a planned invasion force of over 150,000 professional soldiers, including 42,000 Prussians and 100,000 Austrians from their territories in the Netherlands and the Breisgau. In fact, including the contingents provided by Hesse-Kassel and the *émigré* Frenchmen it only reached 80,000. Mutual distrust added onto complete financial embarrassment on the part of the Austrians to result in a far lower contingent, which was then matched by their allies. Austria's miserable performance in the Turkish wars just two years previously had left her financially bereft of resources to mount a significant campaign, even despite a paper size in the army of 281,850. On the other hand, the Revolutionary regimes had begun to produce great changes in the size and make-up of the army. While the king himself was in flight to Varennes, a volunteer reserve was formed by the Assembly of 400,000 National Guards - an enormous increase on any army size that could have been formed previously. By the outbreak of war next spring 100,000 had already mobilised and were serving, of which certainly 50,000 saw service in the Valmy campaign. This numerical superiority continually had decisive effects in the wars which the French Republic waged, regardless of the military talent of the soldiers in hand - a study by Bodinet suggests that 'All the victories achieved by the republican armies suggest were due to their numbers... On every occasion that their numerical superiority was slight... or when they were numerically inferior to the enemy, the French were defeated.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Blanning: *The French Revolutionary Wars 1787-1802* p.71

<sup>2</sup> Blanning: *The French Revolutionary Wars 1787-1802* p.78

<sup>3</sup> Blanning: *The French Revolutionary Wars 1787-1802* p.78

<sup>4</sup> Clausewitz: *On War* p.194-5, 204

<sup>5</sup> quoted in Blanning: *The French Revolutionary Wars 1787-1802* p.120

The French army as well as greatly increasing in size also began to take on an entirely different character, following the statement first made by Guibert in 1772 and reiterated by Dubois in 1789 that 'Every citizen should be a soldier, and every soldier a citizen.' The avoidance of reliance on mercenary troops was not an entirely new concept since it formed the basis of the cantonal system in Prussia, however the application of this doctrine in France entirely destabilised the entire basis of the *ancien régime* army. After Varennes, an annual oath of loyalty to the nation, law, king & constitution every 14 July was made mandatory for all soldiers - though after the execution of the king in January 1793 this aspect of the oath was quietly dropped by the Convention. The abolition of venal posts in the army as well as the creation of 'soldiers' committees comprising of NCOs and rank-and-file soldiers eroded the existing chains of authority inside the army. It should be no surprise that by the end of 1791 6,000 serving officers of the French army had resigned - 60% of officer corps. Of these the vast majority went abroad to serve in the *émigré* service. In many ways this relaxation of the *ancien régime* discipline also worked against the Revolutionary government - Bouillé estimated that of the 90 battalions in eastern France 1790, only 20 were reliable. However as time went on, one extremely important development became clear, which was that as the National Assembly put it 'every citizen has the right to be admitted to every rank' - the upper ranks of the army finally became open to meritocracy. In some ways this was necessary to replace the *émigré* nobles who used to monopolise the army posts. Later it was again necessary to replace to huge numbers of generals who met the guillotine for perceived failure. Yet it also marked a professionalisation of all levels of the army, which bore fruit in some of the tactical manoeuvres of subsequent years. By Year II in 1793-4, 87% of major-generals came from a professional military background and 67% had completed more than 13 years service in the French army. These men had received their training in the *ancien régime* army but had now progressed independently, including commanders such as Jourdan, who had begun his career at the age of 16, and Pichegru, who in 1789 was still an NCO. In the navy this was doubly the case, since all of the Revolution's commanders - Villaret, Joyeuse, Villeneuve, Missiessy, Rosily-Meros, Truget, Bruix and Decrès - had been lieutenants in 1789.

The huge increase in army size presaged by the formation in June 1791 of a volunteer reserve of 400,000 National Guards was entirely unsustainable, with even the committed 'men of 1791' returning to their homes after their allocated one campaigning season. Yet the problem of raising armies required unpopular measures such as the 24 Feb 1793 introduction of conscription, which despite its thoroughness brought few men - only 97,000 by May 1793 - and instead provoked the first stirrings of counter-revolution in the Vendée, whose representatives told the Convention: 'You tell us of enemies who threaten our homes. But it is there that we shall know how to repulse them if they come to attack us.'<sup>6</sup> The measures for bringing in new volunteers proved so unsuccessful that it soon became necessary for decrees of 23 Aug 1793 raising a *levée-en-masse* 'From this moment until that in which our enemies shall have been driven from the territory of the Republic, all Frenchmen are permanently requisitioned for service in the armies.'<sup>7</sup> One must not entirely be cynical about the value of troops raised in this way - they did have several notable advantages over the hired mercenaries so despised by the Revolutionary leaders, most prominently their relative likelihood to remain in the colours without draconian discipline. Greater use could therefore be made of light skirmishers, which had proved in the Seven Years War both against the Prussians, and the British at Fontenoy more effective than more static troops, as well as causing less logistical strains on the supply train. Consequently greater and greater armies could be sustained: official figures suggest 361,000 for February 1793; 842,000 for April 1794; 1,108,000 for September 1794. However these figures should be taken cautiously,

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<sup>6</sup> Blanning: *The French Revolutionary Wars 1787-1802* p.96

<sup>7</sup> Blanning: *The French Revolutionary Wars 1787-1802* p.100

since Bonaparte claimed that of the 106,000 officially in the army of Italy, only 70,000 were actually present. Nevertheless the probable figure of soldiers available in 1794 - 800,000 - was far in excess of that which had ever been available beforehand.

It also came at a considerable cost to the Revolutionary ideals, since as has already been mentioned, any attempts at conscription reduced the numbers of troops imbued with the Revolutionary spirit - despite the best attempts of planners at amalgamating these troops with regulars - as well as directly leading to insurrection in many parts of the country. In many ways it required the Terror to protect any sort of Revolutionary government from its own people, let alone foreign enemies. Dumouriez had shown in 1793 that failure among generals could lead to treason *faute de mieux*. Indeed between 1793-4, 84 generals were guillotined & a general was more likely to be killed by his own government than by enemy forces. This being said, since they were expected to lead from the front, 80 generals were killed in action during the 1790s. The conscription orders of 1793 - when added to reaction to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy - also led to 45,000 people joining the 'Catholic & Royal Army'. That this army, along with 'federalist' armies opposed to Parisian dominance, posed a serious threat to the Republic is certain. However it was not through their mistakes that the rebellions were suppressed, but rather through indiscriminate violence and atrocities. Gendarme Graivache records for instance that 'the cries of those miserable souls so amused the soldiers that they wanted to carry on this game. Once there were no more Royalist women to throw on the flames, they turned to the wives of true patriots.'<sup>8</sup> Likewise, General Westermann gloated that 'we crushed the children under the hooves of the horses and butchered the women... I have not one prisoner to reproach myself with.'<sup>9</sup> The violence of the Terror carried out by an all-powerful Executive in the shape of the Committee of Public Safety was in many ways the only way in which an increasingly desperate war could have been maintained - the Republic faced enemies on at least seven fronts in 1793. In a Republic staffed by regicides and opposed by hard-line Royalists, decisive decision-making and execution - both literal and figurative - provided the Revolution's only hope of survival.

Yet the inability of the foreign powers to gain victory cannot be overstated. France for a great deal of the early stages of the Revolution remained outside the main spheres of interest for the other European powers. The Turkish wars had occupied - and bankrupted - the Austrians until 1790 and the Russians until a year later. Spain and Britain had been fighting each other until 1790. Joseph II of Austria had taken great pleasure in saying to the French *émigrés* in 1790 that 'It is in my interest to be perfectly neutral in all this business, no matter what happens to the King and Queen, and I shall not interfere.' Indeed, when Austria and Prussia later allied against the Revolutionary government in France, the subsequent offensive was itself only one half of an arrangement in which Prussia's principal war aims had nothing to do with French affairs but instead concentrated on aggrandisement in France's ally of Poland. Polish affairs provided the pretext for Prussia to extricate itself at a crucial moment from the war and to sign a peace in 1795 which granted the Revolutionary government its first form of foreign legitimacy. The Polish partition - albeit designed ostensibly to suppress outbreaks of Jacobinism in Poland - diverted Prussian troops from the western front as well as puncturing the alliance of Prussia and Austria which proved the mainstay of the Coalition. In this way, the lack of dedication of France's enemies most certainly contributed to their own lack success. That Prussia for instance despite possessing an army of 200,000 men in 1790 as well as a reserve of 51m talers chose to send only 35,000 to fight the French must show that this war was never their immediate priority.

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<sup>8</sup> Blanning: *The French Revolutionary Wars 1787-1802* p.98

<sup>9</sup> Blanning: *The French Revolutionary Wars 1787-1802* p.98

Despite a coalition fighting on five fronts, the allies also consistently failed to produce a concerted strategy. In the 1794 season British, Austrian/Dutch, Prussian, Austrian, Spanish armies all fought independently. Debacles such as the British defeat at Hondschoote had only come about due to British insistence on taking Dunkirk since it had proved a particular nest of piracy. The Prussian army won at Pirmasens in September 1793 despite making no significant manoeuvres for 4 months. This lack of mutual trust had been the case from the very beginnings of the campaigns. The failure of the Austrians to produce 106,000 men for the Duke of Brunswick in 1792 had led the Prussians to likewise scale-down their contingent - why should they shoulder the responsibility for doing the Austrians' dirty work? Bickering among the allies even when they were in a quasi-united army continued apace, as witnessed by a Prussian officer saying in 1793: 'It is certainly the case that the Austrians hate the French revolutionaries, but they seem to hate us a great deal more!'<sup>10</sup>

In conclusion, the army which the French Revolution sustained was a great deal larger than any which had previously been available to the powers of the *ancien régime*. In this it contrasted with the armies it faced in the 1790s, who remained on the old systems of recruitment and supply. Yet technological change had not advanced sufficiently to allow the French armies to win any more battles than beforehand - if anything the drain on the upper tactical ranks of the army significantly weakened their strategic abilities. In these circumstances, the life or death of the Republic consisted in its ability to utilise the resources under its control to sustain the army which protected it. The Terror in Paris and elsewhere, the central requisitioning of men and materials and the harsh treatment meted out to rebels and royalists alike all formed part of a policy designed to continue the war at all costs. It is noticeable that the Thermidor régime came into being at a time when the French armies were operating on foreign territory, and total central Revolutionary control was no longer necessary. Even then, the failure of the foreign powers to co-ordinate a strategy was partly due to a Revolutionary approach to warfare on the part of the French - constant offensives with overwhelming numbers kept enemies far from Paris. It is noticeable how any changes in the Republic were due to *coups d'état* launched from the existing governmental structures - those of Thermidor, Fructidor, Floréal and finally Brumaire. The protection afforded the Republic by its massive armies left it vulnerable only to itself.

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<sup>10</sup> Blanning: *The French Revolutionary Wars 1787-1802* p.81