



European Armies of the French Revolution, 1789–1802 ed. Frederick C. Schneid.

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While the Napoleonic Wars are among the most heavily studied in world history, those examined in *European Armies of the French Revolution 1789–1802*, aside from the campaigns Napoleon himself conducted, have received much less attention. The same is true of the armies that fought these wars. Editor Frederick C. Schneid (High Point Univ.) has gathered nine essays on these earlier armies by experts in the military history not only of the principal belligerents, but of the smaller states as well. All of the carefully researched essays are equipped with extensive endnotes citing the most relevant secondary literature on their topics, and many of them draw on primary source material as well. Collectively, they present a sophisticated and nuanced view of European military systems of the era and will serve as a valuable reference for students and specialists alike.

Schneid's introduction surveys the wars themselves, noting key campaigns, battles, and leaders, and the shifting coalitions arrayed against the French. It also lays out the overarching thesis of the volume:

The generally accepted historical perception is that European monarchies and their military leaders shunned change. The conservatism of these institutions supposedly prevented any direct and immediate reforms. It is clear that there is some truth to this interpretation, as an institutional ossification clearly existed before the Revolution—even in France. Yet, the problem with these general notions is that they assume that European military institutions were squarely focused on the French, that upon meeting defeat in 1792 and 1793, there was a dramatic concern for growing French military supremacy on the battlefield. These assumptions do not consider factors outside the French war that may have influenced European military thought and the response to the French Revolution. (11–12)

Schneid then notes multiple external factors from earlier in the century that were already shaping and inspiring military reforms from Britain to Russia, emphasizing the importance of understanding the military systems and enterprises of each power from its own perspective.

In chapter 1, “The French Army,” Schneid examines the Old Regime French army's efforts to increase the professionalism of its officer corps in response to problems that arose during the Seven Years War. He assesses the strengths and weaknesses of the army in 1789, noting the effects of the Revolution on its organization, doctrine, leadership, and morale. He points out that many tactical innovations associated with the Revolution and Napoleon such as the mixed order formation had been anticipated before 1789 and that the *levée en masse*, a genuine product of the Revolution, had only a temporary effect on the size of the French army. On a broader scale, he writes, the Revolution opened up military careers to men of talent and allowed more capable commanders to rise to the top when need be. He argues that the French owed their narrow victory at Fleurus in 1794 to a combination of the new and the old:

Fleurus clearly illustrated the organizational advantages of the divisional system on the field of battle and the quality and professionalism of the new officer corps. The French army during the Revolution, therefore, merged the tradition of military professionalism with the revolutionary military policies to

create a national army that succeeded in defeating its enemies on the frontiers and exporting the revolution under the bayonet into Belgium, Holland, western Germany, Spain and Italy by 1797. (33)

Chapters 2, “The Prussian Army,” by Dennis Showalter (Colorado College), and 3, “The Austrian Army,” by Lee Eysturlid (Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy) both portray armies much less hidebound than is sometimes assumed. Showalter demonstrates that Prussian training and discipline were not, in fact, outdated, and that Prussian forces, properly employed, at times outperformed their opponents. The Austrians did less well, but, Eysturlid maintains, their army did not collapse despite its defeats and even showed some capacity to adapt. Both essays examine recruitment, logistics, training, and doctrine.

The Russian and British militaries were active in the period as well, but their later experiences in the Revolutionary wars differed sharply. As Janet Hartley (London School of Economics and Political Science) shows in chapter 4, “The Russian Army,” the Russians were preoccupied by wars against the Turks and Poles until 1795. They finally joined the fray in 1799 with a large, veteran force led by experienced commanders, one of whom, the venerable Gen. Alexander Suvorov, beat the French in several battles in Northern Italy. Much of this chapter concerns the Russians’ methods of recruiting, training, and equipping their army. Hartley shows that the mixture of Russian traditions with western, especially Prussian, ideas and methods enabled the Russians to hold their own against the presumably more modern French.

In chapter 5, “The British Army,” Edward Coss (US Army Command and General Staff College) argues that, by contrast with the Russians, the British had to construct a proper land army essentially from scratch, encountering many setbacks along the way. By the time they intervened in Egypt in 1798, however, they had begun to develop an effective force, due to the efforts of Prime Minister William Pitt and the talented officials who served him. Not surprisingly, Coss shows the British were well ahead of most of their allies in financing and supplying their forces. In addition, their development of effective light infantry units proved most useful in later campaigns in Spain.

Spain, like Russia, was caught up in the wars of the Revolution for a brief period, in its case, 1793–95. No longer a great power, Spain could not afford a large army; even recruiting one proved difficult. As Charles Esdaile (Univ. of Liverpool) points out in chapter 6, “The Spanish Army,” Spain’s relatively secure position through most of the eighteenth century, when France was an ally, left it with few experienced soldiers or commanders. Nonetheless, its military after 1715 was generally trained and equipped like those of most other states. Esdaile concentrates on fighting in the eastern Pyrenees, where the Spanish won notable victories and occupied some French towns for a time. The French generally fielded only somewhat larger forces than the Spanish, who, under capable generals, could generally stop or even defeat the French.

If Spain had trouble building and maintaining an effective army to hold off the French, the smaller states of Germany and Italy faced much greater challenges. Chapters 7, “The Armies of the German Princes,” by Peter Wilson (Univ. of Hull) and 8, “The Armies of the Italian States,” by Ciro Paoletti provide competent surveys of their topics, despite their complicated subject matter and uneven source materials. Several German states had played active roles in the conflicts of the eighteenth century and boasted reasonably modern and efficient forces built for the most part along Prussian guidelines. These forces had often performed well, particularly as elements of coalition armies led by Prussian, Austrian, or British commanders, a trend that continued during the wars of the Revolution. Since these were often only minority contingents within larger, multinational arrays, Wilson cannot easily follow the format of the other chapters, which close with extended case studies of an individual battle or campaign. Instead, he dwells on the recruitment, training, and organization of the German states and the discrete approaches they adopted.

Due to geography and political accident, the Italian case featured a single state that was both independent and large enough to field a substantial military—Piedmont—located on the frontier between France and the rest of Italy. While the Austrians tended to treat the Piedmontese much as they did their German clients, they sometimes had to confront the French on their own. Like the Spanish, Paoletti notes, the Piedmontese had reasonably modern training and equipment and at times fought well against the French.

The military system of the Ottoman Empire, which was forced into the war by Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, was far different from those of the other states examined here. As Virginia Aksan (McMaster Univ.) observes in chapter 9, "The Ottoman Army," like Russia, and to some extent Austria, the multinational Ottoman Empire included peoples with diverse military skills and traditions capitalized on by their rulers. But while the Austrian *Grenzers* (skirmishers) and Russian Cossacks operated like auxiliaries in more conventional armies, the Ottomans relied on provincial warlords for auxiliaries as their traditional elite forces, especially the Janissaries, became either politically or militarily less reliable. As a result, maintaining a substantial army in the field remained difficult. And, too, more capable leaders with better troops could be insubordinate and disregard the sultan's orders and policies. Sultan Selim III, who ruled during the Revolutionary era, enjoyed little success in modernizing his administration and military. Aksan cites an unflattering description of an Ottoman force being organized and sent to Egypt that nonetheless identifies some strong points: British surgeon William Wittman's

observations reveal the Ottoman ability to deliver money, ships, soldiers, and provisions to specific locales, and to stand fast in sieges. While ... Wittman was dismayed at the lack of medical attention to the dead or ill soldier, the need to take care of the fighting man is obvious in the question of biscuits and water. (267)

This observation typifies the findings of many of the authors in this collection. Not one of the armies studied, including the French and Prussian, was without flaws and limitations; all faced dire problems of recruitment, logistics, and training, many of which could only be worked out by trial and error during multiple campaigns. Given the size, scope, and duration of the military operations conducted after 1802, it is clear that the hard knocks suffered in earlier conflicts by most of the states canvassed here prepared them for greater challenges to come.

Though editor Schneid provides no conclusion tying together the essays, they cohere nicely and will appeal to a broad range of both lay readers and scholars.