1 Introduction

It was during the nineteenth century that the legend of the nation-in-arms achieved its fullest expression, presenting an idealised image of the citizen-soldier to which republicans, in France and in many other parts of Europe, remained firmly wedded right up to the Great War of 1914–18. The legend was rooted in notions of civic equality and citizenship, emphasising the courage and resolution of young men who believed in their cause and fought for their people and their nation, selflessly and without regret. In a spirit of willing sacrifice that was reminiscent of the virtue of Athens or Sparta, they were depicted as heroes defending right against the massed forces of darkness, as the Gallic embodiment of an enduring Classical myth. And if in the twentieth century this image lost much of its potency, that had less to do with the popular appeal of the legend – the demand that all should serve the nation in moments of great danger, that rich and poor alike should share in acts of collective sacrifice, continued to be persuasive – than with the more specialist nature of warfare and the technological needs of modern armies. The imposition of mass conscription or the call to popular insurrection against an invader made sense when wars were fought by huge infantry regiments or when fighting meant sniper-fire from the roofs of Paris; they become less relevant in an age when armies have specialist tank regiments and rely on missile technology. This may explain why, in the twentieth century, the myth of the nation-in-arms proved more popular in the emergent nations of the developing world – China, Algeria or Vietnam – than on the European continent.[1] In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, conscription and forced recruitment remain almost universal; indeed, recruitment is not always limited to adult males as it was in France. Many African societies regard those thirteen-year-old boys who have participated in cultural rites of

[1] See the chapters by Arthur Waldron, Greg Lockhart and Douglas Porch in Daniel Moran and Arthur Waldron (eds.), *The People in Arms. Military Myth and National Mobilization since the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 189–255.

passage as having already attained adulthood; while the Constitution of South Africa specifically permits the recruitment in times of emergency of boys over fifteen years of age. Even children are part of the nation-in-arms.[2]

In 1996 France finally gave up its commitment to a conscript army and to the principle of universal military service, President Jacques Chirac accepting that modern warfare required a smaller, and above all a professional, army in which the ideal of the nation-in-arms no longer had a place. But the principle of universal service was not given up without a struggle; to many it seemed that it was part of the nation's culture that was being discarded, part of the republican identity of France.[3] For large sections of the Left, in particular, conscription was not just a fair and equitable basis on which to raise troops for the nation's defence. It was the debt owed by every young Frenchman to his country, and part of what Annie Crépin has identified as a 'triple apprenticeship' – for membership of the nation, for full citizenship and as an induction into the traditions of the French republic.[4] It was therefore seen as a central part of state pedagogy, and this was not something that could be lightly discarded. The issue of conscription had been discussed in a highly political – even an ideological – language. It had been a recurrent theme of the defence debates of the 1970s and 1980s, in which the Left had shown great reluctance to depart from the principle of universal service and from the ideal of civic equality. This stemmed in part from their deep-seated distrust of the officer class in the army, whom they were always prone to suspect of harbouring political ambitions and of plotting to seize power as they had done with Bonaparte in 1800, or Louis Napoleon in 1851, or – most recently – General de Gaulle in 1958. They were especially fearful of creating a separate military class of men divorced from the needs and ambitions of civil society. As recently as 1973 the Communist Party insisted that 'military service, equal for everyone, will be of a length of six months', adding that the equation of the soldier and the citizen must be safeguarded at all costs. 'A democratic statute for soldiers and officers will be adopted', while, to ensure their integration into

[2] Michael Wessells, 'Recruitment of children as soldiers in sub-Saharan Africa: an ecological analysis', in Lars Mjøset and Stephen Van Holde (eds.), *The Comparative Study of Conscription in the Armed Forces (Comparative Social Research,* vol. 20) (Amsterdam, 2002), pp. 239–40.

[3] The continued relevance of the ideal is reflected in correspondence in the columns of *Le Monde* during 1996.

[4] Annie Crépin, *La conscription en débat, ou le triple apprentissage de la nation, de la citoyenneté, de la République, 1798–1889* (Arras, 1998), p. 13.

society, 'military personnel will be able to receive freely newspapers and periodicals of their choice'.[5] Increasingly, however, theirs was a political rather than a military argument, until, at the time of the Gulf War, the emptiness of this rhetoric became patent to all. Armed with a force of young conscripts, France had neither the highly skilled troops needed to operate the most advanced tanks, nor the capacity – since they were largely manned by conscript sailors – to take their aircraft-carriers out of port.[6] From this moment the principle of conscription, like the ideal of universal citizen service, was surely doomed.

With it died the last embers of the legend of the nation-in-arms. The legend had its origins, of course, in the French Revolutionary Wars of the 1790s and in the fiercely patriotic discourse of revolutionary politics, when the *patrie* was in danger of invasion, and when France's soldiers were transformed into 'volunteers', fighting with republican commitment and ferocity to save their country from invasion and defend their new-won freedoms against the paid hirelings of tyrants.[7] The nation-in-arms was the force that turned the war around and repulsed the enemy from French soil. It was composed of men who were deeply committed to the cause of the people, patriotic, idealistic men, the cream of their generation, rushing to the frontiers and fighting selflessly to defend their homes, their womenfolk, their villages. The phrase was central to the revolutionaries' identity, and was rather indiscriminately used to describe whatever army the Revolution chose to place in the field. It was applied to the army of 1792, composed of an uneasy mixture of young volunteers and veterans of the line; the mass army of three-quarters of a million men that saved the Jacobin republic in the campaigns of 1793 and 1794; and even the men who set out to Italy and Egypt under the Directory to fight campaigns that were more imperialistic than revolutionary. All were described in ideological terms by their generals and their political leaders. And all, basking in the roseate glow of memory, took their place in the national narrative as patriots, republicans and idealists, fighting with courage and exuberance – a bravura that was itself specifically revolutionary – to defend a cause in which they profoundly believed.

This image necessarily gained new inflections over time, with the violent swings that marked French political life in the nineteenth

[5] Parti Communiste Français, *Programme commun de gouvernement du Parti Communiste Français et du Parti Socialiste* (Paris, 1972), p. 173, quoted in R.E. Utley, *The French Defence Debate. Consensus and Continuity in the Mitterrand Era* (London, 2000), p. 32.
[6] Utley, *The French Defence Debate*, pp. 185–6.
[7] Moran and Waldron, *The People in Arms*, pp. 1–5.

century, the Revolution giving way to the Empire, then to legitimism, to the July Monarchy, a second republic and a second empire, before finally establishing some kind of institutional stability after 1870 in the shadow of the Paris Commune. But the basic image, and with it the essence of the legend, remained largely unchanged. Indeed, the legend, what some preferred to call the 'myth', of the nation-in-arms gained in strength and in romantic appeal with the passage of time, as France appeared increasingly urban and materialistic – the France of Decazes and Royer-Collard, the Paris of Rambuteau and Haussmann. There was little in the values of political life which they could identify with honour and idealism, *élan* and derring-do; so many looked to the past, to the colour and drama of a very different age. Some continued to identify with the First Republic, and for those committed republicans the legend of the nation-in-arms acquired greater precision; it was the army of the Year II that continued to inspire their loyalty and admiration, the mass army constructed on the basis of a universal call to arms. But for many others the legend was almost infinitely flexible, with the consequence that little distinction was drawn between the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, between Valmy and Austerlitz, Campo Formio and Friedland. These were the high points of a golden generation, and of an era when France was the unquestioned master of Continental Europe. It was an adaptable, elastic image that appealed to many on the Right as well as on the Left of the political spectrum, and which was endorsed by such widely different writers as Balzac and Victor Hugo, Jaurès and Déroulède.[8]

This book is about that legend – its construction and adaptation over succeeding generations, its renewed vitality in moments of revolutionary insurgency like 1848 and 1871, and the manifold uses that were made of it in preparing the young men of the Third Republic – another generation whose lives would be scarred and dominated by war – for the trenches of 1914. If I have preferred to use the word 'legend' rather than 'myth', it is not because there was no mythologising, amongst French republicans in particular, but rather because in the images devoted to the republican armies – whether in art, sculpture, poetry or novels – there was also more than a grain of truth. The democratic image of the citizen-soldier, the potent emblem that was the nation-in-arms, these are the stuff of both myth and legend, developing over time to construct a powerful narrative that would be one of the foundation myths of the French republic. In this it shares much of the potency of another

[8] Alan Forrest, 'L'armée de l'an II: la levée en masse et la création d'un mythe républicain', *Annales historiques de la Révolution Française* 335 (2004), pp. 111–30.

national legend, that of the Anzac forces at Gallipoli, which did so much to provide twentieth-century Australians with a national identity, free from the constraints of the British Empire. It was at Gallipoli in 1915 – rather as at Valmy in 1792 – that the courage and fighting qualities of her soldiers gave Australia the 'baptism of fire' which helped forge her nationhood. The ingredients are so strikingly similar, and the national characteristics which they supposedly revealed were ones with which generations of Australians would be happy to identify and which everyone, from newspaper editors and war correspondents to the writers of war memoirs and regimental histories, reinforced.[9] Australians, it was emphasised, were not like the British troops alongside whom they fought against the Turks. They were self-reliant, loyal to their mates, egalitarian. And they had a hint of a wild streak which their countrymen recognised and admired. 'They seemed to belong', wrote George Johnson in one of the countless tributes to Australia's young heroes, 'not to the standard conceptions of military prowess and discipline, but to some other, younger, more exuberant world of the spirit'; they were 'activated by simple codes of loyalty and comradeship'; they respected their opponents 'far more than they ever admired or respected their own leaders'.[10] At Gallipoli, a heroic-romantic myth was born that would help shape a nation's identity.

The myth of the French citizen-soldier, like its Australian counterpart, had a basis in historical reality, or at least in a selective reading of that reality. There were volunteers and idealists among the soldiers of the Republic, young men who did dream of a new age that was dawning and wished to play their part in the betterment of mankind. There were selfless sons who bade their families a tearful farewell – the trope of so many a painting and popular print[11] – before sacrificing their lives in defence of the rights of others. There were young soldiers in the armies of Italy or the Rhine who wrote home from the front in 1794 to urge still greater sacrifices and more radical laws against hoarders or refractory priests.[12] Such men looked to their local clubs and popular societies for support, and they often saw the Jacobins as

[9] Alistair Thomson, 'A past you can live with: digger memories and the Anzac legend', in Alan Seymour and Richard Nile (eds.), *Anzac: Meaning, Memory and Myth* (London, 1991), pp. 21–31.

[10] George Johnson, 'Anzac: a myth for all mankind' (1965), quoted in Jenny Macleod, *Reconsidering Gallipoli* (Manchester, 2004), p. 6.

[11] For examples of these images see Michel Vovelle, *La Révolution Française: images et récit* (5 vols., Paris, 1986), vol. III, pp. 50–5.

[12] Alan Forrest, *The Soldiers of the French Revolution* (Durham, N.C., 1990), pp. 159–60.

their strongest supporters in civil society.[13] And among their officers there were increasing numbers of committed Jacobins who, after the fall of Robespierre on 9 Thermidor, sought careers in the army so that they could continue to pursue their dreams once the political stage had been denied them. Such men existed. They were not mere figments of the nineteenth-century mind, however furiously their royalist opponents cast scorn on their naivety or their bloodthirsty devotion to terror. But they were relatively few in number and hardly typical of the army at large – except perhaps during that brief Jacobin interlude when the armies were subjected to intense political propaganda and egalitarian values were spread by deputies on mission from the Convention and by *sans-culotte* militants within the ranks. Of all the forces revolutionary France put into the field, it was the army of the Year II that came closest to the patriotic ideal, closest to the army of republican dreams and to the revolutionary legend for future generations. In the words of the socialist Jean Jaurès, the revolutionaries had in 1794 created something new and rather special, an army that was close to the people and ready to fight in its name.[14]

It was also, the legend maintains, an army which, because of the strength of its beliefs and the sincerity of its patriotism, fought better and with greater commitment than other armies, with a courage and bravura unparalleled across Europe. Because they were citizens defending their homes and fighting for their rights, so the argument ran, they suffered none of the self-doubt and low morale that bedevilled the traditional armies of the day. And because they were truly representative of the French people, they shared the virtues and qualities of the population at large – their bravery (self-esteem dictated that every nation considered itself without equal in courage and strength of character), their reckless energy, their gallantry towards women. In keeping with more traditional French self-representations, they took pride in their sociability, their *légèreté*, their penchant for seeking out pleasure.[15] According to the republicans of the 1870s and 1880s, it was only to such an army, an army that identified with the cause and the character of France, that the people could entrust their defence. After the humiliating collapse of the army of the Second Empire in the Franco-Prussian War, it was perhaps unsurprising that the politicians should look to a moral solution rather than a tactical or strategic one. Like Jaurès they believed that

[13] Isser Woloch, *Jacobin Legacy. The Democratic Movement under the Directory* (Princeton, N.J., 1970), p. 195.
[14] Jean Jaurès, *L'armée nouvelle* (2 vols., Paris, 1992), vol. II, p. 248.
[15] David Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France. Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), pp. 147–9.

it was imperative for the army to rediscover the moral force that had characterised the men of the Year II, and they did not hesitate to draw the obvious parallel between the army of 1871 and its predecessor of 1793. 'On this very day 78 years ago', thundered Léon Gambetta on 21 September 1871, 'our fathers founded the Republic and swore, in the face of foreign forces which defiled the sacred soil of the motherland, to live free or to die in combat. They kept their word; they were victorious, and the Republic of 1792 has remained in the memory of men as a symbol of national grandeur'.[16] For Gambetta and the leaders of the Third Republic, identification of these values with republican virtue was self-evident. In a speech commemorating the revolutionary general Hoche, delivered in his home town of Versailles in 1872, Gambetta did not hesitate to link Hoche's military qualities with his devotion to the revolutionary cause. He was a paragon of republicanism, 'the son of the Revolution, and the child of the people created by the Revolution', who led the life of an exemplary patriot; and if he was a great general, it was because he was 'respectful of the rights of each and every individual, understanding the value of his men'.[17] The soldiers of the Year II were not just gentle knights in war; they were commemorated both as citizens and as republicans.

They had, in other words, become incorporated into a specifically republican legend of France's military past, a myth that was at once patriotic and revolutionary. In the process, the soldier of the Year II entered France's public history and took his place in popular memory. He would prove an enduring and largely uncontested figure, the most acceptable form of memorial to an age which was brutally divisive and which continued to conjure up contrasting memories in different regions and different communities within France. The soldier as man of the people, as citizen, lost much of his ideological force, to be integrated into that vague 'religion of liberty' which Raoul Girardet characterises as 'revolutionary sentimentality'.[18] He was remembered more for what he had achieved on the battlefield – his qualities, his patriotism, his professionalism in the face of the enemy – than for his supposed belief in the Jacobin cause. He could be represented as being both the defender of the nation and the representative of the nation as no political leader of the period could hope to do. He became, in other words, depoliticised in the eyes of posterity, one of the few figures emanating

[16] Léon Gambetta, speech of 21 September 1871, quoted in André Rossel, *1870. La première guerre, par l'affiche et l'image* (Paris, 1970).
[17] Léon Gambetta, *Le Général Hoche. Discours prononcé à Versailles le 24 juin 1872* (Paris, 1872), pp. 7, 11.
[18] Raoul Girardet, *La société militaire de 1815 à nos jours* (Paris, 1998), p. 25.

from the revolutionary years who was held blameless for the spread of political violence and with whom all might seek to identify. In this sense, rather like the image of Napoleon during the July Monarchy, the soldier of the Year II could act as a point of reference for both supporters and opponents of the regime, a figure aloof from party politics, whose historical legacy could be – and was – claimed by men of every political persuasion.[19] Bonapartists, radicals, conservative republicans and nationalists, all except the most legitimist of monarchists, might identify with the legacy of the revolutionary armies, using them to rally support and unify the people behind them. Even those republicans who aligned themselves with the extreme Right during the 1880s and 1890s – most notably the supporters of Paul Déroulède's *Ligue des Patriotes* – took obvious pride in donning the cloak of revolutionary patriotism, seeing themselves as the natural heirs of the soldiers of the Year II.[20]

Public history is, by its very nature, highly selective, an exercise in collective amnesia as much as in national commemoration, providing present generations with justificatory readings of their past. The French path from subject to citizen, as Pierre Rosanvallon has demonstrated,[21] would never be smooth or uncontroversial, and many saw in the French Revolution the germs of so much future antipathy, not least among those communities – royalists, Catholics, moderate republicans, opponents of terror and state violence – who counted themselves among the Revolution's victims and whose future identities had been largely moulded by a chastening experience of the First Republic.[22] For these communities – and locally, they were numerous – the legacy of bitter months of dechristianisation and denunciation, faction-fighting and settling old scores, conjured up memories of terror and counter-terror at town and village level. But if politics divided the people against one another, and continued to do so across the nineteenth century, the memory of military triumphs and the call of *la Grande Nation* elicited a much warmer response. In recalling the

[19] Robert Alexander, 'The hero as Houdini: Napoleon and nineteenth-century Bonapartism', *Modern and Contemporary France* 8 (2000), p. 457.

[20] Christian Amalvi, 'Nationalist responses to the Revolution', in Robert Tombs (ed.), *Nationhood and Nationalism in France from Boulangism to the Great War, 1889–1918* (London, 1991), p. 39.

[21] Pierre Rosanvallon has traced the development of French democracy in the period since the Revolution in a trilogy of volumes – *Le sacre du citoyen* (Paris, 1992); *Le peuple introuvable* (Paris, 1998); and *La démocratie inachevée* (Paris, 2000).

[22] The Vendée provides what is almost certainly the most glaring instance of a region whose entire identity was constructed upon its experience of martyrdom during the Jacobin republic. See Jean-Clément Martin, *La Vendée de la mémoire, 1800–1980* (Paris, 1989).

Revolutionary period for posterity the armies offered an acceptable face, an image of patriotic zeal and heroic sacrifice for a regime whose ideology was, in the eyes of many, sullied by bloodletting, vengeance and needless violence.

The presence in so many villages of old soldiers, veterans of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars who had returned home after years of campaigning to resume their civilian lives and – in surprisingly many cases – to assume responsibilities in the lives of local communities, ensured that the memory of war did not fade once military adventure ceased to have political appeal. They could not forget their adventures in the name of liberty and equality, or those – more frequent among the survivors of 1815 – in the armies of Napoleon. Military glories of the past seemed all the more resonant when they were contrasted with the decline in France's ambitions after Napoleon's exile, and their image was further burnished by the parsimonious treatment which the Bourbons reserved for those who had served the republic or the Empire and who now faced an 'impossible reinsertion' into civilian life.[23] Old soldiers looked back with pride, and asked only that their sacrifices be recognised by their compatriots. But how did the wider public, and in particular the public authorities, celebrate and reflect on the wars and the men who had fought in them? That would be an altogether harder question to resolve, as successive regimes sought to position themselves in respect to France's revolutionary tradition. In the process they selected their own myths, and constructed their own versions of the national narrative.

Some, like the Restoration monarchy, shunned any association with those who had fought for what it persisted in calling an illegitimate regime. Others, like the July Monarchy, made huge efforts to associate themselves and their public rhetoric with the military legacy of Bonaparte and of the Year II. All, of course, chose with care what part of that legacy to identify with, which heroes to elevate on national pedestals, and which values to incorporate in the mythology of the nation. Victories were hailed more often than defeats lamented – national galleries and army museums almost invariably bear witness to moments of triumph, skirting lightly over reverses and losses – while the cult of military leaders focussed on those who were tragic as well as heroic figures. Sites of memory in the nineteenth century shunned controversy, and the revolutionary army lent itself to this role, producing its quota of much-sung heroes – men like Hoche, Kléber and Marceau – who

[23] Natalie Petiteau, *Lendemains d'Empire. Les soldats de Napoléon dans la France du dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris, 2003), p. 141.

had died noble deaths, falling on the battlefield or in the line of duty, and who in death encapsulated chivalric values that were eternal and stripped of republican specificity.[24] Like Horatio Nelson in England, an equally compelling icon for a maritime nation, they were presented first and foremost as martyrs, their cult founded in the manner of their dying.[25] The fashion flourished particularly during the last quarter of the nineteenth century in France, in public sculpture, art, literature and theatre, largely in response to the popularity of the earlier cult of another revolutionary general, Napoleon Bonaparte.[26] One could praise the exploits of the Army of the Nord or of Napoleon in Italy without taking a public position on such domestic matters as the Terror, the Supreme Being, or the execution of Louis XVI.

The attention lavished during the nineteenth century on the revolutionary armies and their glorious achievements does, of course, beg the most central question of all. For supporters of the legend it was important to present the soldiers of the republic as a new and different kind of army, since, they insisted, it was its novelty and its egalitarian spirit that enabled them to turn a war of defence in 1793 into a great war of European conquest a year later. An army composed of citizens was necessarily, they believed – and here they were following the teachings of Clausewitz as much as their own political rhetoric – better motivated, driven by desire born of their status as full members of civil society: the 'elemental violence' of the people had been unleashed by the armed uprising of an entire nation.[27] But was it? Was the concept of an army of citizens as novel or as effective as apologists for the French Revolution liked to claim? Did the reality of army life in the 1790s reflect the political rhetoric of the age? Did the citizen-soldier succeed in giving the military a new and more respectable public image, effacing centuries of prejudice and contempt which had been heaped on the men who served the Ancien Régime?[28] In order to understand the power of the legend, we must first explore the army reforms that lie at its root, reforms which veered dramatically over the ten years of the Revolution before annual

[24] Michel Vovelle, 'Fortunes et infortunes de Marceau', in *Le Général Marceau. Figure emblématique du héros révolutionnaire* (exhibition catalogue, Chartres, 1996), p. 28.
[25] N.A.M. Rodger, 'Nelson and Napoleon: an Introduction', in Margarette Lincoln (ed.), *Nelson and Napoléon* (London, 2005), pp. 3–7.
[26] Venita Datta, '"L'appel au soldat": visions of the Napoleonic legend in popular culture of the Belle Epoque', *French Historical Studies* 28 (2005), pp. 1–4.
[27] Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, 1976), p. 479.
[28] E.G. Léonard, *L'armée et ses problèmes au dix-huitième siècle* (Paris, 1958), pp. 47–50.