

Introduction to Volume III

ALAN FORREST AND PETER HICKS

In the third volume of the *Cambridge History of the Napoleonic Wars*, we move away from the battlefield to discuss the many ways in which the Wars affected both those who fought in them and society at large. Even for the most hardened of veterans, battle constituted only a small part of a soldier's military experience. Battles lasted only a few hours, or at most a couple of days, before the firing stopped and the adrenalin ceased flowing, and soon the daily round of exercises and route marches resumed. With them came the return of boredom, the feelings of stagnation and demoralisation which overcame men in the long months between engagements and were especially pronounced during winters spent in camps or barracks.¹ Of course, campaigning brought danger and the risk of injury and death. But in their writings soldiers repeatedly said that they would willingly choose active service if it was a way to escape the deep-seated *ennui* that gnawed at their souls during the lulls between campaigns, the mindless hours spent on guard duty or devoted to what most saw as meaningless training exercises. For the armies, such exercises were necessary to maintain fitness, measured both in mental alertness and in physical suppleness; but for many soldiers they were a purgatory to be endured. It was little wonder that many looked on battles as the most exciting experiences they had lived through, to be treasured in later life and relived when they ran into other veterans at fairs or in village inns.² These were their moments of glory, the moments that would live with them throughout their lives.

Civilians, too – women, children, the old and those rejected for the army – found their lives turned upside down by the disruption brought about by the

¹ For a revealing study of boredom in wartime, see Amanda Laugesen, *Boredom is the enemy: The Intellectual and Imaginative Lives of Australian Soldiers in the Great War and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2016).

² Natalie Petiteau, *Lendemain d'Empire. Les soldats de Napoléon dans la France du 19^e siècle* (Paris: La Boutique de l'Histoire, 2003), 107–36.

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wars. Women's lives were affected in varying ways. They did not have to be caught up in the fighting to have direct experience of the wars: though a small number engaged in the various European armies and became famous as female 'amazons', far more were engaged in ancillary services, supplying food, nursing, or sexual favours to the troops or accompanying their brothers and husbands when they went into battle.³ When sons and husbands were conscripted, wives and mothers were left to fend alone, and over a generation of war women's responsibilities were greatly increased as families lost their principal wage-earner to the army. Gender roles were reversed as women took over more and more of the work on farms and in domestic industry, while foraging for food to feed families left at home became an increasingly time-consuming task. For many, the return of peace brought added burdens, with extra mouths to feed at a time when the economy was still disrupted by war production and rates of unemployment were historically high. Many soldiers who had lost limbs and suffered life-changing wounds on the battlefield returned home disabled and incapacitated or were condemned to spend the rest of their lives in mental hospitals and asylums, hidden from civil society. The degree of their disfigurement varied, of course, but some feared to mingle with other people, such was their sense of shame and fear of spreading revulsion: for them normal life could never resume. The sketches made by the British surgeon Charles Bell of the wounds suffered by his patients after Waterloo give a sense of the damage and mutilation which shells and bullets routinely caused, and the scars of war they would carry for the rest of their lives.⁴ They also explain why some of the major advances in medical research in this period came through military medicine, the result of treating war wounds and injuries.

The Napoleonic Wars left their mark on every sector of society and every aspect of public life. This third volume of the *Cambridge History* is divided into four thematic parts which collectively assess the social, political and cultural impact of the Wars. Part I examines the experiences of the soldiers who fought in them, and discusses such questions as military morale, fear of wounds and fevers, and evolving ideas of honour and masculinity. As Leighton James demonstrates, those who returned after their war was over

3 Karen Hagemann, "'Heroic Virgins' and 'Bellicose Amazons': Armed Women, the Gender Order and the German Public during and after the Anti-Napoleonic Wars', *European History Quarterly*, 37 (2007), 507–27.

4 Michael Brown, 'Wounds and Wonder: Emotion, Imagination and War in the Cultures of Romantic Surgery', *Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies*, 43 (2020), 239–59; see also Marine Devillers-Argouarc'h, *Charles Bell, chirurgien à Waterloo* (Paris: Michalon, 2015).

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retained some positive memories of their years in uniform, of friendship and adventure as well as of danger and suffering. In his chapter on military medicine, Martin Howard shows how, across Europe, a number of senior army doctors fought against military and administrative indifference and the incompetence of some of their colleagues to provide meaningful medical services, both on the battlefield and in hospitals in nearby towns. Catriona Kennedy analyses women's experience of the wars, whether as nurses and sutlers with the armies or as part of what we can already recognise as a 'home front', though the phrase was not yet in current use. Finally, as the war spread across the continent and beyond, Elodie Duché examines the contrasting fates of the thousands of prisoners of war taken on foreign soil, who might be herded into temporary prisons or on to pontoons in British harbours, or, as officers and gentlemen, granted their freedom on parole.

If the fighting spread across the continent, so, with each conquest, did the Napoleonic Empire, engulfing other peoples and provinces and imposing imperial rule, and this is the subject of the second part of this volume. For many Europeans, the experience of war was inextricably linked to the experience of empire and the benefits and impositions that came with it – the effects of blockade and a war economy, the introduction of new systems of administration and justice, increased policing and customs controls, demands for conscripts, and encounters with other peoples and unfamiliar tongues as borders were criss-crossed and local traditions too often trampled underfoot. In Part II, successive chapters look at the contrasting phenomena of collaboration and resistance as Napoleon's armies advanced – collaboration most graphically shown by Poles eager for emancipation from Austrian, Prussian or Russian rule, or resistance, whether to military service through desertion, or to the invader through revolts and popular insurrections of the kind that the French encountered in Spain and much of Italy. These insurrections often became mythologised in the course of the nineteenth century as part of a nascent nationalist discourse, as in the Austrian Tyrol and much of German Central Europe, where the wars against Napoleon would live on in popular memory as wars of liberation from foreign tyranny. For those who took part in them, however, the picture was usually more nuanced, and German unity in the face of invasion was something of a myth. Hanoverians, for instance, fought with the British army for an elector who was also the British king; in 1812, Austria sent a corps to the *Grande Armée* to support Napoleon against their traditional ally, Russia; while at Leipzig Saxony also supported Napoleon and fought against many of their fellow Germans. Loyalties to states and their rulers remained paramount.

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Events as disruptive as the Napoleonic Wars inevitably had a deep and lasting impact on European culture, too, both at the time and across much of the century that followed as wartime experience gave way to waves of regret and nostalgia. War and revolution combined to redefine the age, to provide new beginnings, new points of reference for the nineteenth-century world. Or, as Peter Fritzsche sees it in his chapter in this volume, ‘what made the wars extraordinary was the fact that the immense military machine of war worked in duo with the “great talking machine” of the Revolution so that the events that careened down the roads were understood in political and ideological terms’.⁵ In Part III, a series of chapters examines the portrayal in art and literature of wartime experience, a portrayal that was most immediate in the diaries and memoirs that allowed soldiers’ feelings and emotions to show through and became the raw material for future generations of scholars. Heroism and patriotic feeling are ever-present, too, in the art and creative writing of the age, and they are replicated in a wide variety of cultural media: in painting and sculpture, in caricature and popular imagery, in poetry and music, and in a host of memorabilia and ephemera produced, both at the time and during the decades that followed, to satisfy a new and enthusiastic public demand for further insights into the Wars. In the course of the nineteenth century famous generals and military victories would be commemorated in festivals and reconstructions, while their names would live on in the streets, squares and bridges of every European city. And when in the twentieth century cinema became the most influential form of popular culture, again we find that Napoleon and the wars of the Napoleonic era are a recurrent theme, whether it be in France, where Napoleon’s legend remained most enduring, in the authoritarian regimes of Germany and the Soviet Union, or more widely across Western Europe.

The Napoleonic Wars left their mark in other, more practical ways, too, affecting both the internal politics of European states and the international political order, and these are discussed in Part IV of this volume. We first see something of the immediate aftermath of war for individual lives in Natalie Petiteau’s chapter on the fate of French soldiers when they returned to civil society, in many cases without the basic skills they would need to find work and stability. Karen Hagemann shows how their return impacted on the gender order, too, as post-war societies sought to re-incorporate their disbanded soldiers and establish a new peacetime equilibrium. There were longer-term effects, too, on the military and on diplomacy, which would

⁵ See pages 417–32 below.

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continue to be felt across much of the nineteenth century. The legacy of the Wars was perhaps most sharply felt by Europe's armies. As Hew Strachan shows, the writings of military theorists like Clausewitz and Jomini, both profound admirers of Napoleon's military genius, remained so influential that even in 1914, on the outbreak of the First World War, 'for most soldiers, and particularly for those who had attended staff colleges, the Napoleonic Wars remained a – possibly the – principal reference point in their professional education'. Napoleon's legacy was important, too, for the political ideologies of both right and left, not least for conservatives and monarchists, while in France itself the imperial years produced a new ideology in Bonapartism, a substantial component of which, argues Robert Alexander, 'consisted of constructing, or re-constructing, memory of the first Napoleonic episode'. The Wars, and Napoleon's ultimate defeat, also helped to define international diplomacy and the future of the global world order. Within Europe, says Beatrice de Graaf, it 'planted the seed of a new, modern system of European collective security – including the irrevocably linked imperialist surveillance of one's own population – and increased territorial expansion at the expense of the non-European world'. Much of Central and Latin America, in particular, would be recast by the fallout from the conflict. And if, as historians are generally agreed, the hundred years from the Congress of Vienna to the First World War can be seen as 'Britain's century', one of unrivalled commercial prosperity and of global expansion, Napoleon must bear his share of responsibility. Though Pierre Nora did not include them in the selection of *lieux de mémoire* which he assembled for France,⁶ the Napoleonic Wars surely merit inclusion among Europe's most enduring sites of memory.

6 Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire*, 7 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1984–1992).