

François Houdecek, Vivre la Grande armée. Être soldat au temps de Napoléon, Paris (CNRS Éditions) 2023, 406 p., ISBN 978-2-271-12411-1, EUR 26,00.

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Given the Napoleonic army's fame and impact, and sheer size, surprisingly little is known about the daily experience of the 2.3 million who served in its ranks. Houdecek fills this gap in this weighty tome that draws on a variety of primary sources, both unpublished and published. The former includes, unsurprisingly, official documents (especially reports penned by the Minister of War) lodged in the French Archives nationales and in the Service historique de la défense. Noteworthy is the inclusion of documentation from the hospital of Bicêtre. As for the published primary sources, these include the usual suspects: printed collections of laws and instructions, correspondence and of course the voluminous memoir literature that the Napoleonic Wars generated in large measure to satisfy an expanding reading public post-1815. In the Introduction, Houdecek highlights the limitations of this literature, chief among them being that it reflects the voices of only a tiny fraction (about 0.07 %) of those who served, while the majority (60%) were unable to write.

Despite this inevitable limitation, Houdecek reconstructs the experience of the ordinary Napoleonic soldier from the point he was summoned to partake in the lottery that determined who was likely to be called up. An intrusive and for many traumatising medical examination followed, and if passed, the even more alienating process of initiation into the regiments would begin. This part of the book is especially rich in material that will interest historians of the body, of medical science and of group psychology. Those interested in state institutions will also learn a great deal, despite this particular field being relatively well served by some excellent studies by historians such as Isser Woloch and Alan Forrest. Houdecek details, for example, the surprisingly sophisticated schemes to evade the draft, including the establishment of marriage agencies, whereby young men could avoid mobilisation by marrying (usually much older) women. Less effective, presumably, were the attempts at sorcery and ritual performed to defeat the bureaucratic state by fixing the numbers that came out of the lottery urn.

For those incorporated into the ranks, new challenges awaited, even before the campaigns and battles. Napoleonic warfare has always enjoyed the reputation of being pretty mobile, at least by the standards of the day, but the figure of up to 40 kilometres covered per day (albeit on prepared military roads) still astonishes. So does the weight of equipment carried by the typical infantryman: up to 30 kilogrammes, of which 4.375 kg consisted of the 1.93 meter long 1777 pattern musket with a fixed



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bayonet. Napoleonic soldiers certainly did not travel light, even if the army did as a whole. What is also striking is the high attrition rate, even before the fighting began, with horrifying percentages lost to exhaustion, acute home sickness and illness. Those who survived got through in part thanks to very close relationships and networks to compensate for the loss of family. That said, young conscripts needed to earn acceptance by older soldiers and simply acclimatising to the routine of soldiering – the drill, food preparation, intimate sleeping arrangements, mastery of horsemanship in the cavalry, maintenance of uniform and equipment, and marching – was of itself insufficient. Only fortitude in the face of battle gained true acceptance.

The more familiar aspect of the Napoleonic Wars that remains the focus of most of the literature – the large-scale pitched battle – dominates only the second half of this book. Here, the diversity of experience comes to the fore, something that can only be fully covered in a study of substantial length. In large measure, this diversity reflected the variety of units that composed the Napoleonic army, including most obviously, the basic division between service arms (infantry, cavalry, artillery). The largest arm was the infantry and within this the so-called line infantry. As the name implies, infantrymen in these regiments were generally arranged in linear formations during battle, to maximum firepower. There, they were increasingly subject to heavy artillery bombardment and casualties from this as opposed to other dangers (small arms fire from enemy infantry; sabre wounds from cavalry) rose as a consequence: at Austerlitz (2 December 1805), for example, small arms fire still accounted for 56 % of mortal wounds sustained on the French side, but artillery fire was no longer far behind (40 %), with bladed weapons accounting for only a very small proportion (4 %). Indeed, in this respect, one can detect in the late Napoleonic period experiences not dissimilar from the Western Front of the First World War, such as what would later be termed »shell shock«. The apparent randomness and dehumanising impact of artillery fire, the complete lack of agency of those subject to it and its sustained nature (unlike infantry and cavalry exchanges) created new psychological effects which the specialists of the time were ill-equipped to treat.

Today, we are most inclined to view these Napoleonic soldiers as victims. Houdecek does not dispute this by diminishing the hardships and horrors they endured. Instead, he uncovers the values of the period: those held by most soldiers and by the civilians unfortunate enough to encounter them. The outcome of this effort is a very important and indeed seminal book. Fluently written, well supported by a rich evidential base and of sufficient length to bring out nuance and diversity, it does justice to the experience of the millions of ordinary individuals who fought, died and in some cases, survived fighting in Napoleon's armies.



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