

Dying for Liberty in the French Revolutionary Wars

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The starting point for this paper is the work of Michel Vovelle, a prolific historian whose work very successfully bridged the divide between *histoire événementielle* and the *longue durée*. Vovelle's studies of the revolutionary mentality and of dechristianization brought the methods of the Annales school to bear on the French Revolution. I am interested here not so much in Vovelle's work on the Revolution as in his contribution to the understanding of Western attitudes toward death. Despite their differences, both Vovelle and his colleague and rival in the field of death studies, Philippe Ariès, saw the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as marking a significant turning point in the history of death. I am interested in looking at how the changes in attitudes toward death which these historians discerned related to the French Revolution, specifically to the experience of mass death in the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. My argument begins with the premise that a new regime of death was beginning to emerge at the end of the eighteenth century as death was resisted and dechristianized and the dead themselves physically removed from their proximity to the living. Most importantly, while the relationship between the living and the dead became physically more distant, as the remains of the dead were relocated from communal graves in city churchyards to individualized plots in suburban cemeteries, it also became spiritually or emotionally closer. Death became more sentimental. The French Revolution disrupted the emergence of death's new regime in several ways. Far from resisting death, the Revolutionary Wars resulted in mass mortality on an unprecedented scale. Mass death on the battlefield restored the physical intimacy of the living and the dead in discomfiting ways. The pomp of state funerals for revolutionary figures such as Mirabeau and Marat brought back "baroque" ostentation when the trend was toward greater simplicity in funeral rites. Above all, at a time when a "revolution in feeling" made "your death" rather than "my death" the focus of emotion, political necessity required feelings for "the other," whether husband, wife, brother, son or friend, to be sacrificed, or at least channeled in politically desirable ways. The challenge for French men and women, to which they responded in a variety of ways, was how to cope with these conflicting imperatives.

As historians like David Bell have emphasized, the French Revolutionary Wars witnessed a significant intensification of warfare and an unprecedented mobilization of human populations. They also resulted in mass killing on a new scale. Approximately 458,000 Frenchmen died in the Revolutionary Wars, 900,000 in the Napoleonic Wars: an overall figure that is often compared to

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the 1.38 million French soldiers killed in the First World War.¹ Evaluating the psychological effects of these losses is a complex problem that needs to take into account overall population size, the relationship between civilian and military mortality, as well as prevailing attitudes toward death. If we contextualize, for example, the 4,097 deaths that occurred in the French army in 1748, the final year of the War of the Austrian Succession, we can see that this was a relatively tiny proportion of the 925,000 who died in the Kingdom as a whole. Given that civilian and military death rates were virtually identical, and that most deaths, whether military or civilian, were caused by disease, it seems likely that the psychological impact of the war losses was relatively minor.² Military losses during the Revolutionary Wars were significantly higher, averaging 38,000 a year. Nevertheless, Hervé Drévilleon has argued that, in proportion to the overall French population, this rate of loss was not dissimilar to that of the War of the Spanish Succession, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, approximately 1.5 percent of the total population. Not until the Napoleonic Wars, says Drévilleon, when losses rose to an average of 75,000 deaths per year, was there a significant escalation.³ Nevertheless, the analysis of Jacques Houdaille shows that during the years from 1793 to 1795, French military deaths were on average 95,000 per year, exceeding by a considerable margin (20,000) the average for the Napoleonic Wars. The generation born between 1770 and 1774 bore an unequal share of this burden, accounting for 268,000 out of an estimated total of 534,000 deaths. Houdaille calculates that this represented twenty-three percent of the young men from this generation who reached the age of twenty.⁴ This percentage exceeded that which Houdaille calculated for the generation born between 1790 and 1795 and which experienced the disastrous campaigns of 1812–13 (20.5 percent). It also came remarkably close to the scale of loss suffered by the classes born between 1891 and 1895, which bore the brunt of French losses in the First World War (24.5 percent).⁵ In statistical terms, at least, the evidence suggests that the impact of war on the generation of 1789 was as significant as that on the generation of 1914.

The impact of these war losses came upon a society whose relationship with death was changing. Underlying these changes was the gradual increase in life expectancy stemming from small but cumulative changes in medicine and obstetrics, as well as in public hygiene and administration. This “resistance” to death contributed to a significant decline in mortality, particularly that of infants. For women, life expectancy at birth rose from 32.1 during the decade of the Revolution to 39.3 in the decade from 1820 to 1829. For men, life expectancy at birth rose by 39 percent (10.8 years) between the last years of the old regime and 1830.⁶ Changing demographic realities accompanied, among the elites at least, the emergence of a more secular outlook focused on this world rather than on the one to come. Michel Vovelle pointed to the evidence of such a change occurring over the course of the eighteenth century in the reduction of charitable bequests in wills and in the diminishing concern expressed by testators concerning the

¹ Houdaille, “Les armées de la Révolution,” 845; Houdaille, “Pertes de l’armée de terre sous le premier Empire,” 50; Prost, “Compter les vivants et les morts,” 41–60.

² Lucenet, “La mortalité dans l’infanterie française,” 403.

³ Drévilleon calculates that these figures represented 1.12 percent, 1.35 percent and 2.5 percent of the French population at the time of the War of the Spanish Succession, the French revolutionary wars and the Napoleonic wars, respectively. Drévilleon, *L’Individu et la Guerre*, 183.

⁴ Houdaille, “Les armées de la Révolution,” 845. For the purposes of this analysis, Houdaille relies upon a calculation of total losses for the revolutionary period that varies from his own calculation of 458,000.

⁵ Houdaille, “Pertes de l’armée de terre sous le premier Empire,” 50.

⁶ Bideau, Dupâquier, and Biraben, “La Mortalité,” 282.

funeral rites and religious services to be observed on their behalf.⁷ Increasingly, wills called for simplicity in funeral rites, as their authors asked to be buried “without show or worldly pride.”⁸ At about the same time, a new burial culture emerged as concern for both the physical and moral wellbeing of society prompted the clearing out of human remains from urban churchyards and the opening of more salubrious and orderly suburban cemeteries.⁹ Most importantly, the change in attitudes toward death was manifest in a “revolution in feeling” which, according to Philippe Ariès, occurred “within one or two generations” at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Preoccupation with “my death,” focused upon making the necessary provisions for one’s own death, gave way to a preoccupation with “your death” – the death of one’s closest friends or relations. To Ariès, this change was the manifestation of an affective revolution which, at the same time as it made family relationships more intimate and more emotionally intense, also made the death of the “other” intolerable, justifying both outpourings of grief and unprecedented efforts to compensate for the loss through memorialization.¹⁰

Revolutionary responses to the sharp escalation in military mortality need to be considered in relation to the affective revolution that was transforming attitudes toward death. The prevailing response – certainly the one that dominated the official discourse, but which extended far beyond it – was to valorize and aggressively promote the soldier’s death as a vital patriotic sacrifice. This was done not just to mobilize society for the war effort, but also to provide it with consolation and compensation. Public representations insisted upon the rewards obtained in return for the sacrifice endured, both for society in terms of its present and future security and for the soldier himself, with respect to his reputation and memory. They frequently acknowledged and even emphasized the emotional price to be paid by family members who suffered the sacrifice of husbands, fathers and sons. Nevertheless, recognition of the right to tears was always followed by the injunction to dry one’s eyes, to look beyond the loss of a loved one and see instead the homeland’s benefit.

Revolutionary publicists insisted above all upon the willing sacrifice of citizens, who were usually represented articulating this message as they died. The heroic anecdotes recounted in the *Recueil des Actions héroïques et civiques des républicains français*, published by the National Convention and illustrated by the engraver L.F. Labrousse under the title *Les Fastes du Peuple français*, are a good example. The ideal soldier was so committed to the Republic that he was prepared to take his own life rather than submit to the enemy. Martin Vinay, a volunteer from the Drôme, was therefore praised for killing himself with his own sword rather than fall into enemy hands, declaring with his final words, “At least the enemy won’t take me alive” (Figure 1).¹¹ Grenadier J.B. Pourtenac was represented, already wounded, imploring a comrade to finish him off, saying, “My friend, take from me what life I have left. I prefer to die by your hand than by that of my country’s enemies” (Figure 2).¹² Even more importantly, the citizen-soldier put duty to country before duty to family. Rose-Liberté Barrau served as a grenadier in the Army of the Pyrénées-Occidentales alongside her brother and her husband. During an attack on a Spanish position Barrau’s brother was killed and her husband wounded; “republican virtue

⁷ Vovelle, *Piété baroque et déchristianisation*, 75–107. Subsequent historians have questioned Vovelle’s thesis concerning dechristianization, arguing that attachment to Christian funerary rites remained strong among the populace well into the nineteenth century. See in particular Clarke, *Commemorating the Dead*, 42–48.

⁸ Vovelle, *La Mort et l’Occident*, 418.

⁹ On the emergence of a new burial culture in Paris, see Legacey, *Making Space for the Dead*, 17–98.

¹⁰ Ariès, *The Hour of our Death*, 442; 471–72.

¹¹ Grasset de Saint-Sauveur, *Les Fastes du Peuple français*, no. 45.

¹² *Ibid.*, no. 37.

triumphed over love just as it had triumphed over nature,” however, and Barrau carried on the fight until the enemy had been defeated. Only then did she return to minister to her wounded husband (Figure 3).¹³ Alexis Emonet’s brother had his head taken off by a cannon ball while performing sentry duty on the Rhine. Emonet insisted upon completing his brother’s duty (Figure 4).

Despite the entreaties of his comrades, who wished to spare him this sad spectacle, he insisted on being taken to the place where his brother’s blood had flowed, and where his bloody corpse would inflame the desire to avenge his death, or to perish as gloriously; and it was only after fulfilling his duty to his homeland, that he paid to nature the tribute of his sensibility.¹⁴

Although the anecdote recounted in the *Recueil* concerned a soldier, it provided an emotional script for all citizens who had lost a loved one: vengeance and duty were to take precedence over familial sorrow. A final print in the series also made this point. It shows a Corsican volunteer, Noel Varsy, expiring on the field of battle and at the same time imploring his mother, who happens to be present: “Do not cry, mother[,] I die for the homeland” (Figure 5). Here, explicitly stated, was the injunction, often repeated by the revolutionaries, denying the right to tears.



Figure 1. Martin Vinay, volontaire au 3^{ème} bataillon de la Drôme: “l’ennemi du moins ne m’aura pas vivant.” ©Bibliothèque nationale de France.

¹³ Convention nationale, *Recueil des Actions héroïques et civiques* no. 1, 19. A later issue of the *Recueil* recounted the exploits of another cross-dressing female soldier, Rose Bouillou, in almost identical terms. *Ibid.*, no. 5, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.



Figure 2. J. B. Portenac, grenadier du 53^{ème} regt. d'infanterie: “J’aime mieux mourir de ta main que de celles des ennemis de mon pays.” ©Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Figure 3. Leyrac et Barrau son épouse, tous deux Grenadiers: “Actuellement qu’ils mordent la poussière, je te dois tous mes soins.” ©Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Figure 4. Claude Emonet volontaire au 5^{ème} bataillon de l'Ain: "Je vais achever moi la faction de mon frère." ©Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Figure 5. Noel Varsy volontaire, né en Corse: "Pleure pas ma mère je meurs pour la patrie." ©Bibliothèque nationale de France.

The revolutionaries' denial of the right to tears was qualified, rather than absolute. They acknowledged the legitimacy of sorrow, but insisted that its expression give way to more virile emotions. An account of a festival honoring General Hoche in 1797 explained how the emotions of the participants were played upon. First to speak was the President of the Department, who, "by stirring up their spirits," prepared the crowd "so favorably for new and powerful emotions." Then came Citizen Bérenger, Professor of Eloquence and Literature, who delivered the principal eulogy. "We expected, and that expectation was not in vain," said the report, "we expected the most oratorical and the most compelling rhetoric. Our spirits were suspended between sobs and admiration; we wept, we want to keep weeping; we want to weep again; we wish to be nourished, broken by sorrow."¹⁵

As Joseph Clarke has shown, more genuine emotions than those whipped up by the Directory for generals like Hoche are to be discovered in reports of local festivals honoring common soldiers who were killed during the Year Two.¹⁶ Yet such festivals were no different from those of the Directory in that they provided an emotional script for their participants, whereby sorrow was followed by reaffirmation of commitment to the national cause. A festival was held at Epinal on September 30, 1793 in honor of the "children of the Republic" who had been killed fighting in the republican armies. The Secretary of the Popular Society intoned a prayer to the Supreme Being which began by invoking His mercy for those who had sacrificed their lives for freedom but which then became an appeal for Him to punish the enemies of the Republic: "Appear, all powerful God, arm yourself with the sword of your justice, strike down, exterminate all the kings, these princes, these brigands who seek to sully France..., place yourself at the head of our legions, lead them everywhere to victory". The symbolic itinerary of the festival moved from the solemn precincts of a church into the open air and the martial surroundings of the Field of Mars; the black crepe of mourning worn by the women was replaced by the tri-colored sashes of the Republic. In dispatching his report to the National Convention, the Secretary expressed his hope that the Society's tribute would strengthen the public spirit and "encourage the zeal of the young to avenge the blood of their elders who died for the one and indivisible Republic."¹⁷

Such ceremonies played a significant role in channeling the grief experienced by communities as news filtered back of soldiers who were killed fighting on the frontiers. The sorrow of relatives was accorded respect and sympathy, but those relatives were also expected to affirm their undimmed patriotism as well as their acceptance of their loss for the sake of the homeland. The popular Society of Valence, in the Department of the Drôme, recorded that news of the death of "brave Captain Deneysel,"¹⁸ who was killed fighting on the Spanish frontier, had "plunged the city into sorrow." Its report began with a description of how the captain had died in his men's arms, crying "How happy I am to die for my homeland! Long live the Republic!" It then went on to describe how, "after a moving homage to the patriotism and devotion of a father who, having only one son, had given him to France," the Society had approved a motion to place Deneysel's father and his property under the protection of the city. The following day, the father himself came to the meeting of the popular Society. "Everybody was silent as he entered,"

¹⁵ Anon., *Procès-verbal de la cérémonie funèbre*, 12.

¹⁶ Clarke, *Commemorating the Dead*, 246–253.

¹⁷ Laurent, *Archives parlementaires*, 76, 332.

¹⁸ Jean François Victor Deneysel, born June 25, 1769, joined the 12 Battalion of volunteers from the Drôme in August, 1792. He was killed in July 1794. Service Historique de la Défense, Archives de Guerre (hereafter SHD, AG): Armée de Terre, Xw 30: Volontaires nationaux: Doubs, Drôme, Eure.

continued the report, “so incapable did we feel of alleviating such a great sorrow.” Jean Deneysel then spoke to the assembly, thanking it for its tribute to, “my tender son..., this dear son whom I offered to the homeland” and concluding with a reaffirmation of his patriotism: “I beg the assembly to be persuaded that the loss of my son has not at all changed the love I have for the Republic. On the contrary, I could not better avenge his death than by remaining faithful to it, and I am always ready to sacrifice my life if the public happiness demands it!”¹⁹ Grief was channeled into an expression of readiness for further sacrifice.

Revolutionary festivals did not conceal the emotional sacrifice that was required of relatives. They frequently acknowledged and even emphasized the emotional price to be paid by family members who lost husbands, fathers and sons. Those family members were often honored participants at those festivals, appropriately grief-stricken yet resolute, subjects of sympathy and admiration. Insisting upon the emotional sacrifice became a way to insist ever more forcefully upon the imperatives of patriotism. Thus, popular prints such as Coqueret’s “The sacrifice of one’s deepest affections is owed to the homeland!” (Figure 6) or its pendant “It is glorious to die for the homeland!” (Figure 7) did not necessarily subvert the republican message, despite the apparent contradiction between the patriotic sentiments embodied in the titles and the expressions of familial grief represented in the images. In the second of these prints, representing the young hussar dying gracefully in the arms of a young woman who is herself senseless with grief, an elderly gentleman attempts to provide consolation by pointing to what appears to be a captured enemy flag, a sign that the sacrifice, rewarded by victory, was not in vain.²⁰



Figure 6. Pierre-Charles Coqueret after Dutailly, *On doit à sa patrie le sacrifice de ses plus chères affections*. ©Bibliothèque nationale de France.

¹⁹ SHD, AG, Armée de Terre, Xw 30: Volontaires nationaux: Doubs, Drôme, Eure, no. 110.

²⁰ For insightful interpretations of these images see Dodman, *What Nostalgia Was*, 106–109; Mainz, *Days of Glory?*, 197–200.



Figure 7. Pierre-Charles Coqueret after Dutailly, *Il est glorieux de mourir pour sa patrie!*
©Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Civilians and soldiers alike echoed this ideology of willing self-sacrifice in their own testimony. As Thomas Dodman has demonstrated, however, the emotional demands placed upon them were too much for many revolutionary soldiers to bear. Deprived of feminine affection and thrust into the world of martial masculinity, incessantly told they were free men and at the same time told what to do, they lapsed into a profound state of alienation, fell ill and died of what was known at the time as nostalgia.²¹ Others responded to the ubiquity of death on the battlefield and in the hospitals by acquiring a state of emotional indifference. Perhaps this was most eloquently expressed by the lover of Madame de Staël, Albert Rocca:

The habit of danger caused death to be seen as one of the most ordinary circumstances of life: One pitied wounded comrades; but as soon as they ceased to live, one felt an indifference toward them that went so far as irony. When soldiers recognized in passing one of their companions laid out on the ground, they said: “He doesn’t need anything now, he won’t mistreat his horse anymore, he’ll be able to get drunk” or other words of this kind which reflected in those who said them a stoic disdain for existence; it was the only funeral oration for our warriors who fell in battle.²²

²¹ Dodman, *What Nostalgia Was*, 93–235.

²² Rocca, *Œuvres*, 107.

Personal expressions of sentiment on the part of civilians for those who died fighting are harder to come by. Some family correspondence, however, provides a glimpse. The correspondence of the Vatin family, based in Saint-Quentin, tells the story of a family severely disrupted by war. Three of the five sons of Madelon Thiesset, Joseph, Augustin and Sevère, joined the revolutionary armies in 1793. None of the three survived the war. Joseph died in Brumaire, Year 4, a few months after leaving the army. Augustin died in Floréal, Year 9, also shortly after leaving the army, having spent two years as a British prisoner of war. What became of Sevère is uncertain, but Célestine Néret, their sister, wrote in 1803 that she believed him to be dead. Madelon herself died in Brumaire, Year 9. Her letters before that express the anxiety and sorrow occasioned by the separations, temporary or permanent, caused by the war. On March 6, 1795, she was still able to write patriotically to her son, Célestin, a cobbler in Pézenas, that “In a revolution, one must be ready for anything. You are not unaware that there will be a price to be paid before enjoying the benefits the Convention prepares for us.”²³ For Madelon, the price was steep. She wrote to Célestin again, eight months later, on November 17, 1795, after the death of Joseph:

It is with sorrow that I write to tell you of the death of your brother Joseph, which causes me great sadness. He was ill for only two weeks – his sickness was only in his head – and was buried the day before yesterday. You don’t need me to tell you the pain I felt at that moment. You know the love that I have always had for you all and surely understand how deeply I felt this death, especially after having yearned for so long for the return of my child and having seen him at peace for such a short time.²⁴

Civilians, too, had to make do, often going for years without knowing the fate of their loved ones. The only two of Madelon’s seven children who remained in France (Pierre and Louison made their way to Belgium and then to England), Célestin and Célestine, subsequently got into difficulties trying to sort out their mother’s small inheritance of land. They appear to have settled this dispute rather more happily than Balzac’s fictional Colonel Chabert and his wife settled theirs. Balzac presents Chabert’s former wife in an unsympathetic light, but her pragmatic approach to the Colonel’s presumed death at the Battle of Eylau and her determination to cast him back into oblivion upon his inconvenient resurrection, do not seem unlikely.²⁵

The responses of the revolutionary generation to the shock of war were not simple or uniform. They do suggest, however, that the extraordinary claims war made on that generation’s lives and emotions unsettled and disrupted the transition toward a more intimate, emotional experience of death. The efforts to channel public sentiment by means of republican propaganda and ritual represented the appropriation of “your death” – of the sentiments attached to the deaths of loved ones – by the revolutionary state. Death was nationalized at the same time as it was sentimentalized. The popular societies became the emotional front lines of the struggle between patriotic duty and familial affection. Those societies were determined to protect the feelings of

²³ Archives Départementales (hereafter AD) de l’Hérault, 1J1704 Famille Vatin, de Pézenas. 1766–1858. Letter of 16 Ventôse, Year 3. Available at: http://archives-pierresvives.herault.fr/archive/resultats/tresors/vignettes/FRAD034_000000169/n:31?RECH_S=1+J+1704&RECH_TYPE=exact&type=tresors (accessed June 3, 2019).

²⁴ AD de l’Hérault, 1J1704 Famille Vatin, de Pézenas. 1766–1858. Letter of 26 Brumaire, Year 4.

²⁵ Balzac, *Colonel Chabert*.

family members by defending the willing sacrifice of their loved ones. In September 1794, the Popular Society of Foix, in the Ariège, approved a letter defending a Captain Amardel, who had died on the Spanish frontier on 26 Thermidor (August 13, 1794) against charges of cowardice. The letter denounced the “aristocrats [who] wish to bring sorrow to the bosom of respectable families who should expect only tender consolation from their co-citizens.” It insisted that Amardel had fought bravely, surrounded by enemies and crying “War to the death” until his last breath.²⁶ A citizen Mangin was referred to the Society’s Watch Committee for casting aspersions on Amardel’s reputation. At the same time, a festival was approved for the dedication of a war memorial to Amardel and other local defenders of the fatherland who had been killed. By appropriating, channeling and defending the powerful and conflicting emotions attached to the soldier’s death, the French Revolution helped to provide the psychological foundations for total war. It also defined the contours of an emotional battleground, embracing both soldiers and civilians, that would bring immense suffering to later generations.

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²⁶ “aristocrates veulent porter la désolation dans le sein des familles respectables qui ne devraient s’attendre qu’à la tendre consolation de leurs concitoyens.”; “Guerre à mort.” SHD, AG, Xw 7: Volontaires nationaux: Ariège: Société populaire de Foix, meeting of 4 Fructidor Year Two (July 12, 1794): Copie de l’attestation du Conseil d’Administration du 1^{er} bataillon de Grenadiers.

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