

H-France Review Vol. 11 (June 2011), No. 122

Thomas Cardoza, *Intrepid Women: Cantinières and Vivandières of the French Army*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. xiv + 295 pp. \$39.95 (hb). ISBN 978-0-253-35451-8.

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War has been a constant plague of humanity and, in one capacity or another, women have been involved in it from the very beginning. Frequent victims of warfare, they have been killed, brutalized, and enslaved for generations, and as the recent events in Congo clearly reveal, atrocities against women remain a poignant constant in modern conflicts as well. Yet, women have also been active participants of war, defending their families and communities, and serving alongside men on the fields of battle. In the sixteenth century, the widow Kenau Hasselaer famously led the resistance of the women of Haarlem against the besieging Spaniards while Trieu Thi Trinh led the Vietnamese struggle against the Chinese in the mid-third century, proudly declaring, “I wish to ride the tempest, tame the waves, kill the sharks. I want to drive the enemy away to save our people.”[1]

Women historically played an important role in European armies, where enterprising women followed armies, provided food and drink during the heat of battle, and cooked, sewed and did laundry in more peaceful times. Some were married to soldiers or provided intimate companionship to troops. Oftentimes, these women participated in actual combat and filled ranks in place of fallen soldiers. For example, the life of Regula Engel, the daughter of a Swiss mercenary from Zurich, is a heartrending story of endurance, bravery and stoicism in the face of hardship. Born around 1761, she ran away from her family at thirteen and married a sergeant major in the French army, whom she followed throughout his campaigns. The mother of seven children, she participated in wars in Italy in 1796-1797 and Egypt in 1798-1799 (where she gave birth to twins) and the 1800 campaign in Italy, during which two of her sons and a son-in-law were killed at Marengo. Five years later, again pregnant, she was wounded at Austerlitz; her child survived only to be killed at Waterloo in 1815. In 1808, she followed her husband to Spain, where her other son was captured by the Spaniards and nailed to a tree to die. In 1809, pregnant with her twentieth child, she took part in France’s war against Austria but was captured at Regensburg. Fortunately for her, captivity saved her from the disastrous campaign in Russia in 1812 and subsequent battles in Germany and France. However, she did welcome Napoleon’s return in 1815, fought alongside French troops at Waterloo and was shot in the neck and bayoneted in the side. Her husband was killed before her eyes and her son was shot in the head. Engel survived these ordeals to spend the remaining years of her life caring for her surviving children before dying at the age of ninety-two in Zurich.[2]

Engel’s was, by all standards, a remarkable life. Yet, as Thomas Cardoza states in his fascinating book, *Intrepid Women: Cantinières and Vivandières of the French Army*, women like Engel or Madeleine Kintelberger, whose exploits the author cites on the first pages of the book, “appear in no history books, no monument reminds us of [their] deeds, and even in [their] own country [they] remain completely unknown” (p. 2). Indeed, despite the plethora of works on various aspects of military history, there is still no wide-ranging study of women’s service and contributions. It is exactly this lacuna in historical knowledge that the author sets out to fill, and does it quite successfully in the case of the French *cantinières* and *vivandières*.

Intrepid Women is divided into six chapters, each dealing with a particular period in the history of the French military forces. Chapter one deals with the *vivandières* in the Royal Army, which had formalized women's roles by the mid-eighteenth century. Chapters two and three trace the *vivandières'* experiences during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, while chapter four looks at their service during the post-Napoleonic era. In chapter five, the author explores the "Golden Age" of the *cantinières* during the Second French Empire, while the final chapter guides the reader through the Third Republic and the end of the *cantinières* institution.

On the opening pages of the book, Cardoza traces the origins of the *cantinières* and *vivandières*. The reign of Louis XIV saw two types of women serving in the French Royal Army: the *blanchisseuses* were soldiers' wives who provided laundry and needlework services to troops, while the *vivandières* sold food and drink (p. 12). The author notes that these women enjoyed a much more lucrative trade compared to the civilian entrepreneurs who usually accompanied the armies. The *vivandières* trace their origin to the *vivandier* or "soldier given the privilege of selling food, drink and sundries such as wig powder and show polish to the soldiers of his regiment" (p. 15). There were eight *vivandiers*, chosen from senior non-commissioned officers, in each regiment. Yet, the military duties oftentimes prevented *vivandiers* from properly running their canteens, and this is where their wives—the *vivandières*—proved to be useful. As Cardoza explains, "*Vivandiers* married because they could not fully exploit the economic benefits of their positions without wives. A wife could legally leave camp to buy (or steal) goods for sale since she posed no desertion risk" (pp. 15-16). Thus, while the *vivandier* owned the business, it was the *vivandière* who actually ran it and did most of the labor. As the author notes, *vivandières*, like the soldiers with whom they served and lived, came from the very lowest social strata. As the author puts it, "daughters of peasants were the majority, but some daughters of the urban poor and of urban artisans also followed the army" (p. 16). In later eras, "the disposed, the rootless and the orphaned" constituted a large proportion of the *vivandières* (p. 36). At the same time, the army itself provided a constant supply of *vivandières*, as girls born and raised into the military married soldiers. In addition, the French army also saw many foreign women serving as *vivandières*, mostly from Switzerland, Ireland and Germanic states.

The *vivandière's* tent served as "a social center for the soldiers of the regiment: a place to drink, smoke and talk" (p. 22). The official regulations prohibited *vivandières* from engaging in illegal activities but they certainly were involved in lucrative illegal trades, offering gambling tables, supplying smuggled goods and providing sexual services. The regulations imposed harsh punishments for these activities—prostitutes could lose their noses and ears—but, as Cardoza notes, "it remains an open question how closely the army enforced these rules in wartime or how many *vivandières* participated in these illegal trades" (p. 23). As the book reveals, there is no evidence of *vivandières* being punished for prostitution which prompts the author to suggest that "two separate groups of women existed around the army camps, and that *vivandières* and prostitutes were mutually exclusive" (p. 23). While soldiers' wives received recognition under the French military code in 1706, it was not until 1761 that the French Ministry of War attempted to classify and register all camp followers (p. 27) and it was not until the French Revolution that the *vivandières* received official recognition. The author explains that, starting in 1793, a woman no longer became a *vivandière* simply by marrying a soldier, but rather had to apply for a position directly to the proper regimental authorities. Successful *vivandières* received a certificate of permission (*patente*) and were "officially recognized in their own persons" and "held their posts on their own" (p. 33). At the same time, the Revolutionary period saw a gradual merging of *blanchisseuses* and *vivandières* into "a single position that incorporated all of the 'female' military support functions" (p. 34).

One of the fascinating, and strongest, aspects of this book is the focus on *vivandières/cantinières* as focal points of a military family. A military life was certainly "not idyllic" (p. 39). *Vivandières* continued to marry soldiers and bear children (although fewer children than their predecessors) whose existence amidst constant warfare, marches, and bivouacs, was precarious, chaotic, dangerous and unforgiving. As the author notes, "loss of fathers was routine, while mothers also often died or were wounded. Even if

they avoided battles, the children themselves suffered from the same disease and exposure that killed far more soldiers than did combat throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (p. 39). Throughout the book, the author intertwines personal stories of *vivandières/cantinières* painting a poignant portrait of human experiences in early modern armies. He cites many cases of female heroism on the battlefield, some of them even gaining national recognition, but he also shows a more uncaring side of *vivandières/cantinières* who were “first and foremost businesswomen [and] displayed a wide range of temperaments in their business dealings”(p. 71). Soldiers often complained that they were overcharged for goods and, as one French officer wrote, “all the money acquired or pillaged by the soldiers went to the *vivandières*. These women, exploiting the penury of food and the abundance of cash, sometimes sold a little glass of brandy for as much as twenty francs” (p. 72).

The end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and the subsequent military reduction in France had a profound impact on the *vivandières*. The Bourbon monarchy sought to return to the pre-1789 state of female military labor and hundreds of *vivandières* “suddenly found themselves unemployed, unwanted and under suspicion. They received no severance pay, travel money or any other form of assistance, and for some, this was a much of a hardship as any they had endured on campaign” (p. 105). These women had known no other life than that with the army and struggled to adjust to civilian life. Their political loyalties had a great influence as to whether they were reinstated in position or granted a pension. Because of this “massive dislocation,” the *cantinières* “of the first half of the nineteenth century tended to be either old-timers or their daughters,” though there were some newcomers who sought to escape poverty by joining the army (pp. 109-110).

The French invasion of Algeria in 1830 proved to be a turning point in the *cantinières*’ history. In 1831-1832, new regulations fixed the number of *blanchisseuses-vivandières*, expanded women’s roles and restored the all-purpose *cantinière* of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period. Under new regulations, women who wished to exercise any profession in the army had to apply to the military police and prove their skills and good behavior before obtaining a *patente* and a metal plaque that recorded their job designation and registration number. “The Golden Age of *Cantinières*” is covered in chapter five which deals with daily life, recruitment and the battle service of *cantinières* during the Second Empire from 1852 to 1870. Cardoza argues that from the outset, Louis Napoleon “showed... a strong desire to encourage the growth of the Napoleonic legend. Since *cantinières* were a part of that legend, their place in the expanded French army was assured” (p. 127). Indeed, the number of *cantinières* dramatically increased, their uniforms grew more elaborate and *cantinières* themselves became “the object of popular interest in the form of color lithographs, books of illustrations, toy figurines, and even advertisements”(p. 127) The *cantinières*’ official function still remained that of selling food, drink and tobacco to soldiers but, by the second half of the nineteenth century, their usefulness greatly diminished as the result of industrialization, improved military administration, and the adoption of railroad and steamships. Yet their role as a morale support for troops remained strong and, “by the 1860s, the importance of *cantinières* as symbols may have outweighed their practical military utility” (p. 131). This sentiment is probably summed up best in a French officer’s funeral oration for his regimental *cantinière*: “You were our mother, our sister, our companion. Everywhere the French flag floated, in defeat as in glory, you followed us, bringing the consolation of your smile, your encouragements in our reverses” (p. 131).

The final, sixth, chapter showed the decline of the *cantinière* during the Third Republic. The author focuses on the gradual elimination of this institution between 1875 and 1906 and argues that this was the result of two separate efforts to reform the French army which sought to replace the old professional army with a republican citizen army and increase the efficiency and uniformity of armed forces. Cardoza explains that the administrative and logistical improvements of the late nineteenth century meant that the *cantinières*’ role was ultimately reduced to that of the providers of liquor at a time when the military authorities increasingly fought against alcohol consumption in the army. Furthermore, the author also underscores the role of feminism in suppression of the *cantinière*

institution. Even though “*cantinières* and feminists seem to have remained largely ignorant of one another’s existence” (p. 219), the *cantinières*’ involvement in a traditionally masculine occupation, their efforts to gain decorations and benefits for military service, as well as the unusual independence gained during their working years which placed them outside the normal restrictions placed on contemporary women, contributed to a perceived breakdown in gender roles and influenced the decision to abolish the institution.

Overall, this is a well-written, richly detailed and satisfying book on a topic that has been unfairly ignored and deserves greater attention. It is very well-documented (with over 700 notes) and makes excellent use of archival sources from France’s national (Service historique de l’Armée de terre, Musée de l’armée at the Hôtel des Invalides, Bibliothèque Nationale) and departmental (of Doubs, Maine-et-Loire, Val d’Oise, Ardennes, Vosges) archives. In addition, the author incorporates dozens of primary sources (memoirs, letters, diaries, etc) into his narrative to show the human side of the war and allow the reader to see the book’s heroines both in their snappy uniforms and in lesser-known roles as mothers, wives and companions to soldiers.[3] In his introduction, Cardoza cites one historian’s lament that the *cantinières* had left “only a silhouette, although one desires a complete portrait” (p. 11). With this book, he dispels many shadows surrounding the French *cantinières* and provides an engaging and insightful portrayal of their lives.

NOTES

[1] Arlene Bergman, *Women of Vietnam* (San Francisco: Peoples Press, 1974), p. 54.

[2] For details, see Regula Engel, *Frau Oberst Engel: von Cairo bis New York, von Elba bis Waterloo: Memoiren einer Amazone aus napoleonischer Zeit* (Zurich: Artemis-Verlag, 1977).

[3] The author also maintains a very useful companion site that can be accessed at <http://www.cantinieres.com/>.

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ISSN 1553-9172