

H-France Review Vol. 17 (April 2017), No. 61

Jonathan Abel, *Guibert: Father of Napoleon's Grande Armée*, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016, xii + 278 pp. Illustrations, maps, index. \$34.95 (hb) ISBN 978-0-8061-5443-5.

Review by Beatrice Heuser, University of Reading.

Not only does the Jacques-Antoine-Hippolyte, Comte de Guibert deserve to be thought of as the French Clausewitz, he should also be recognized as the strategist with the greatest influence on Clausewitz's thinking. It has long been a sad state of affairs that Guibert has not been given more prominence in Anglophone strategic studies curricula. This can now finally change with the publication of Jonathan Abel's finely researched biography.

A nobleman by birth, albeit one who would feel constrained later in life to marry for money, Guibert—like Clausewitz—joined the army and received his baptism of fire in his early teens. He only found time to catch up on his education later. Shortly after the Seven-Years' War, Guibert wrote a much debated and secretly circulated *Essai*, a cross between a war manual following a classical Vegetian pattern, a discourse on war and society, and a brief on civil-military relations. He called it *General Essay on Tactics* as the word 'Tactics' was just making its entry into West European languages with a somewhat vague meaning that related politics to warfare. The word 'Strategy' as yet only existed in Greek, and the terms 'système de guerre' and 'Wehrsystem' (which have never made it into English) were not yet current, but that is essentially what he was writing about. Decades before Kant, Guibert described an ideal world in which states governed in the interest of their populations (not of dynasties) would have no reason to go to war with one another, but instead trade peacefully and benefit from good relations.

The *Essai* was finally published anonymously in London in 1772. The work contains the common admiration of the philosophers of his time for the Roman Republic, the Rome whose *citizens* had conquered many kingdoms and whose pride in their citizenship made them feel superior to the kings they defeated. Applying this model to the ideal state of his own times, Guibert did not use the term 'citizen-soldiers' but spoke of a 'national militia', in principle tasked only with the defence of their country. But if attacked, this militia, these 'happy citizens, interested in defending [their own] prosperity' could not be defeated by the sort of *stipendiaires* (mercenaries, paid professional soldiers) that constituted the European armies of his own age. Indeed, such a state would fight back 'with all the efforts in its power,' going over to the offensive to conquer, but not to retain its conquests, only making 'expeditions' into enemy territory. If 'one has come to insult this happy and pacific people, it will rise up [*il se soulève*], it leaves its home. It will perish, up to the last [man] if necessary, but it will obtain satisfaction, it will avenge itself, and it will assure, with the explosion of this vengeance, its future peace [*repos*]' (p. 190).' As no professional army fighting alongside this 'militia' is mentioned, and as this force is contrasted with the *stipendiaires* of a potential aggressor, Guibert has probably rightly been interpreted as calling, in the prologue to his *Essai*, for a citizen-army. Indeed, he was so closely associated with the concept of the citizen soldier that he was thought by his late eighteenth century bibliographer Johann Samuel Ersch to have been the author of the eponymous anonymous publication of 1780, *Le soldat citoyen*, now properly attributed to Joseph Servan.

Abel's otherwise excellent biography of Guibert gets itself tangled on this point. Abel writes, on the same page: 'The most famous passage from the *Essai* calls for a disciplined army of citizen-soldiers fighting for their nation, though it is often taken out of context...' and then refers to the passage cited above, saying 'The passage calls not for a citizen army, but rather a citizen militia to defend the state's borders as a method of last resort' (p.190). But Abel makes us re-consider why subsequent generations until the late twentieth century saw Guibert as the prophet of the French Revolutionary Way of War.[1] While I cannot go along with Abel's attempt to refute the young Guibert's enthusiasm for a nation in arms, it is indisputable that Guibert's subsequent experience in the War Ministry and in the field led him to adopt a different stance, coming out clearly for the need for both a militia and a professional force, plus a police force foreshadowing the French *gendarmarie*. Thus, as I have already argued elsewhere, it is problematic to see Guibert as the prophet of French Revolutionary warfare, [2] let alone a visionary of 'Total War', as David Bell has claimed.[3]

Guibert's duties as an officer took him to Corsica, newly integrated into the French kingdom. The Corsicans soon manifested their dissatisfaction with this and rose in a revolt that Guibert and the French forces crushed. Guibert achieved some fame in this context that helped him, together with the fame gleaned from his *Essai* and his excellent connections to the Parisian salons, to secure employment in the Ministry of War as the right hand of successive ministers. This is where Abel's biography of Guibert becomes particularly fascinating: Abel traces the toxic bureaucratic politics in and around the War Ministry which prevented the full application of ambitious reform plans made by Guibert for his respective ministers to overhaul the French army which had shown itself in great need of this in the Seven Years' War and in subsequent smaller campaigns. The chapters dealing with these intrigues, and the resistance to change on the part of all those with a vested interest in the old system, provide priceless examples of such intra-governmental rivalry and intrigues that constitute perfect cases for the study of bureaucratic pathology. As Guibert put it himself,

'In almost all states of Europe, the different branches of administration are governed by particular ministers, whose interests and views jar, and are reciprocally detrimental to each other; each of them is occupied exclusively with his object. One might imagine the other departments belonged to a different nation. Happy, indeed, are those States where the ministers, jealous of each other, do not act as open enemies.'

Guibert was open to argument, however. Further writings, particularly the *Defence of the modern system of war* (1779) encapsulated a new and evolved stage of his and his ministers' thinking about recruitment and the armed forces. *On the Public Forces* (1790) shows a much more nuanced idea of the armed forces he wanted for France. Here, Guibert did indeed differentiate between a militia or defensive army of citizens who would defend their own towns and regions from attack, a police force that would ensure order within France, and a professional army that very much unlike militias could be used for foreign expeditions. He made the case that such soldiers must be excluded from the body politic, as everything they stood for was antithetical to the politically conscious and active citizen, who in turn should not bear arms except in emergencies. By the time he wrote these works, he had come a long way from his youthful enthusiasm for a nation in arms.

A substantial part of Abel's biography of Guibert focuses on a subject that seems to have been dearer to Guibert himself than that all his ideas about civil-military relations that would ensure his posthumous and lasting fame. And that was the configuration tactical configurations of regiments, into what was called the thin and the deep order (*ordre mince et ordre profond*). This clearly agitated the minds of his age, and far more responses were written to address this aspect of Guibert's work than the potential social dynamite contained in his *de facto* plea for a constitutional monarchy and a citizen militia. Abel demonstrates that in the 1770s, in a series of military exercises, Guibert, on behalf of the Ministry of War, experimented with and reported on different configurations of units. These exercises led him to advocate formations that would be mixtures of the two.

Abel's biography of Guibert delves into his private life, something of a *cause célèbre*. His relationship with the great *salonnière* and literary figure, Julie de Lespinasse, helped him achieve fame. That affair did not stop him from marrying for money, which in turn left Lespinasse heart-broken. Their love letters have been compared to those of Abélard and Héloïse, and figure among the great collections of epistolary exchanges. Guibert prided himself on his style of writing which to us today seems bloated and overly fond of page-long sentences. He tried his hand at poetry, and had high hopes of fame through plays that have long since been forgotten. Nevertheless, he gained election to the Académie Française in 1786, evidence not only of loyal friends in the Republic of Letters, but also of the general quality of his writing which allowed his sponsors to override the objections of his many adversaries. Although he does not seem to have been particularly handsome, Guibert was lionised by the ladies of his day. One such friendship is perhaps of particular interest was that between Guibert and the young Madame de Staël, who in turn met Clausewitz when the latter was returning from being prisoner of war in France after Prussia's defeat at Jena and Auerstedt. One might speculate that it could have been through Madame de Staël that Clausewitz became acquainted with Guibert's writings, which she likely received directly from the author, and which, given their friendship, she is likely to have kept.

But by then Guibert was long dead. After his frustrating albeit instructive years at the War Ministry, Guibert, at the outbreak of the Revolution, had tried his hand at politics, but failed to secure election. He died from illness in 1790 at the age of 47.

Guibert's bequest to posterity was reduced very much to the *Essai*. During the years of the Revolution and ever since he would be seen as the prophet of the *levée en masse*, even though this completely disregards Guibert's change of heart about the employment of citizen-soldiers reflected in his later works, which were all but ignored by many of those writing about him. Abel is right to emphasise that from today's perspective, Guibert stands out for his recognition of the co-dependency of the nature of the state and the configuration and spirit of its armed forces (p.56). It is this area of thinking about war and society that was pioneered by Guibert, and it is above all for these considerations that he deserves to be considered with the greatest philosophers of war and society.

NOTES

[1] Lucien Poirier, *Les voix de la stratégie* (Paris: Fayard, 1985), p.139.

[2] Beatrice Heuser, 'Guibert (1744-1790): Prophet of Total War?', in Stig Förster & Roger Chickering (eds.): *War in an Age of Revolution: The Wars of American Independence and French Revolution, 1775-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Feb. 2010), pp.49-67.

[3] David Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008), p.80.

[4] Comte de Guibert, *Défense du Système de Guerre Moderne* (1779) reprinted in Guibert : *Stratégiques* (Paris: Herne, 1977), pp. 477-564, and *De la Force publique* (1790) reprinted in Guibert, *Stratégiques* (Paris: Herne, 1977), pp. 565-638.

Beatrice Heuser

University of Reading

d.b.g.heuser@reading.ac.uk

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print

form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172