

H-France Review Vol. 4 (March 2004), No. 33

**David M. Hopkin**, *Soldier and Peasant in French Popular Culture 1766-1870*. Royal Historical Society Studies in History New Series, Volume 28. Woodbridge, Suffolk and Rochester, New York: The Boydell Press for the Royal Historical Society, 2003. xii + 394 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 1-086193-2587.

Review by Robert M. Schwartz, Mount Holyoke College.

---

In eighteenth and nineteenth-century France, military conscription by lot (*tirage*) was a rite of passage full of ritualized meaning. It pitted the French state against young peasant men, and whatever saints, talismans, and magic they could marshal, the better to draw the lucky ticket that would save them from the draft. In Lorraine, the wise lad was careful to set out for the drawing on his right foot, and on the way he avoided women, priests, and animals—all carriers of bad luck. Then, at the critical moment, he made the sign of the cross with his tongue before reaching into the urn and retrieving his number, using, to be sure, his left hand, being closer to his heart. This and much more about popular beliefs linked to soldiering is set before us in this densely researched book. It is a feast for students of popular culture. And while gourmets will savor selected details such as those above, gourmands will take on the whole—a veritable manual on popular imagery and folk tales in the province of Lorraine.

The author chose Lorraine for good reason. A frontier region, it hosted more soldiers per head than interior provinces, and Lorrainers accepted conscripted military service without the marked resistance of the South and other regions, an acceptance nurtured by a mixture of Bonapartism and nationalism that took root in peasant culture. Well-endowed with soldiers, Lorraine was also rich in popular imagery, thanks to the great center of popular print-making in Epinal. There, by 1845, the Pellerin firm alone was producing more than three million images a year, while the combined annual production of Epinal imagists in the 1860s was more than twelve million. Of the images that have survived, Hopkin focuses on those depicting soldiers.

The first of five large chapters is an erudite account of popular imagery which readers unfamiliar with the field will find especially useful. New in the imagery of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century (up to 1870) was the pictorial association of the soldier and the nation, superceding the long-held view of the soldier as adventurer and marauder. Although the producers of images were urban bourgeois, they geared their products for the rural market, embedding themes of national and international interest in localized settings familiar to their clientele. Although Hopkin wisely points out that the images cannot be taken as direct sources of popular culture, they were, he argues, faithful to a centuries-long tradition of imagery that peasants consumed and made their own. As to the tantalizing question of how peasants *used* the images they bought from urban creators, we learn that there was a saint for everything and every saint was in its place. Over the peasant household door was Saint Agatha, standing guard against fire. The image of Christ hung above the bed of the husband and wife, while Saint John the Baptist watched over the children. The animals did not lack for protection either, for Saint Blaize was hung in the barn to ward off harm and sickness. Here and elsewhere obscure but telling pieces of rural life come to light.

Chapter two offers a painstaking introduction to folk tales and their myriad problems of interpretation. After a thoughtful review of difficulties and necessary qualifications, Hopkin, like Robert Darnton, holds that careful methods can reveal the social meaning of a tale and thus the mental worlds of the tellers and listeners. [1] In this endeavor, folk tales and social realities interact, calling forth requisite ingenuity on the part of the interpreter and an elastic notion of evidence and inference on the part of the reader. Fairy

tales provided “the cultural prisms through which people saw their lives, and they cast their own histories in those terms” (p. 100). Hence, in a soldier’s memoirs the recasting of his life could include rescuing a princess or finding food from a magic sack to feed a starving family. Putting himself in the role of hero, the story-telling soldier reworked an existing oral tradition and passed it on with a new, individual twist: he was “an agent of cultural formation” (p. 124).

Readers whose taste for ingenious speculation is limited will warm to the substantial chapters that follow, where a concrete account of the life and representations of soldiering pursues the story from draftee to veteran. Skillfully presented, Hopkin’s study of the annual cycle of conscription and departure shows how it was absorbed into the existing fabric of village rituals and festive occasions, including courtship, Saint Jean’s Eve, and the collection of alms and donations, to name a few. For young men, their identity was forged by membership in the “*classe*” of similarly aged lads who stood together for the draft in a given year and who passed on to the army when the lots they drew were not among the lucky few for exemption. Although replacements could be had for handsome sums (500 to 2500 francs), Lorrainers boasted a very low level of draft dodging and a robust level of volunteer enlistments, explained as much by “recruiting-officer misery” as by a hard-hearted father or by the appeal of an alternative life of adventure or failure in love, as so often portrayed in popular songs and tales (p. 188).

In pursuing the recruit into his army service we return to the world of images and follow the author’s close, nuanced readings of archetypal themes. Here, his earlier claim that the popular perception (and the reality) of soldiering shifted from negative to positive, from marauder to servant of the nation is not readily borne out by the ample print images that grace the work, and the interpretive challenges of popular imagery come to a head. What is clear, as Hopkin admits, is that the notion of the soldier as contributing to peasant welfare was rarely depicted in pictures or tales. Instead, the images continue to portray the soldier as a real or likely threat, whether he be pillager, ravager, seducer, trickster, or debtor in flight. This continuity was reinforced through the persistent reprinting of stock pictures, which were sometimes updated by a change of uniform and other details. Popular imagery was conservative. But if the intended message of the prints remained rather fixed, negative, and archaic, the meanings that peasants assigned to the prints are a conundrum, elusive objects of conjecture. Sensitive to the problem, Hopkin concludes that ambivalence likely sums up the main thrust of popular meaning: however suspect or threatening soldiers were deemed to be, their perceived freedom, their adventures, their travels—all formed an attractive, if fanciful, alternative to the peasant’s everyday struggle for existence. For their escape value, peasants thought they were worth the purchase price. Whether in fact they bought them in significant numbers is unclear, however. As an approximation, it would be helpful to know how many soldiering images were produced and distributed as compared to those, say, of Saint Agathe and other religious prints.

In prints, songs, and tales, returning veterans were a varied lot, ranging from the prodigal son who came home just as profligate and the bad lad transformed into patriot, to the Cincinnatus image of soldier-farmer created by elites, as well as the wandering veteran unfit for marriage or a settled life, and the lover who returned to find the girl of his dreams in someone else’s arms. Here, again, the *leitmotif* of suspicion marked popular images, in contrast to the positive view of veterans as citizen soldiers that developed among elites during the Enlightenment and the 19th century. For peasants, the crafty, devil-may-care, womanizing veteran retained its attraction, concludes Hopkin, for it permitted indulging oneself vicariously in prohibited pleasures.

In stepping back to conclude and place his work in broader perspective, Hopkin points to the debate as to when and how peasants developed a national consciousness and the connected question of whether the army was one of the institutions that turned rural Lorrainers into Frenchmen. However admirable the aim, this seems a question *mal posé* because he is aware that his sources, by their nature attesting more to continuity than change, have limited usefulness as indicators of peasant political outlooks or their evolution. So, not surprisingly, they give little or no hint of patriotism or national identity that

was likely emerging. That said, these sources do carry his main point: the ambivalent image of the soldier in peasant minds persisted as a mixture of suspicion and contempt with grudging admiration.

Leaving things there seems a missed opportunity to pursue other interesting connections. Peter Burke's argument about the divergence and subsequent re-convergence of elite and popular culture from the 16th through the 19th century suggests itself, for the author takes due note of the disjunction between the positive images of elites and the enduring negative and ambivalent ones of popular imagination.[2] Because the urban creators of the images were changing their minds even as they continued to supply the rural market with prints portraying more or less archaic themes, do we conclude that elites facilitated the continuation of traditional beliefs? More likely, peasants held multiple or flexible identities, seeing themselves as French patriots when war and invasion loomed as during the French Revolution, even though the soldiering images they bought appear to suggest another story.

*Soldier and Peasant* makes clear that Hopkin's research and evident knowledge well equip him to address these questions in the future, and hopefully he will. His significant accomplishment here lies in the rich, revealing details of conscription, of popular imagery, and of folk tales recounted and embellished at *veillées*.

---

#### NOTES

[1] Robert Darnton, "Peasants Tell Tales: The Meaning of Mother Goose," *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), pp. 9-72.

[2] Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: New York University Press, 1978).

Robert M. Schwartz  
Mount Holyoke College  
rschwart@mtholyoke.edu

Copyright © 2004 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

*H-France Review* Vol. 4 (March 2004), No. 33

ISSN 1553-9172