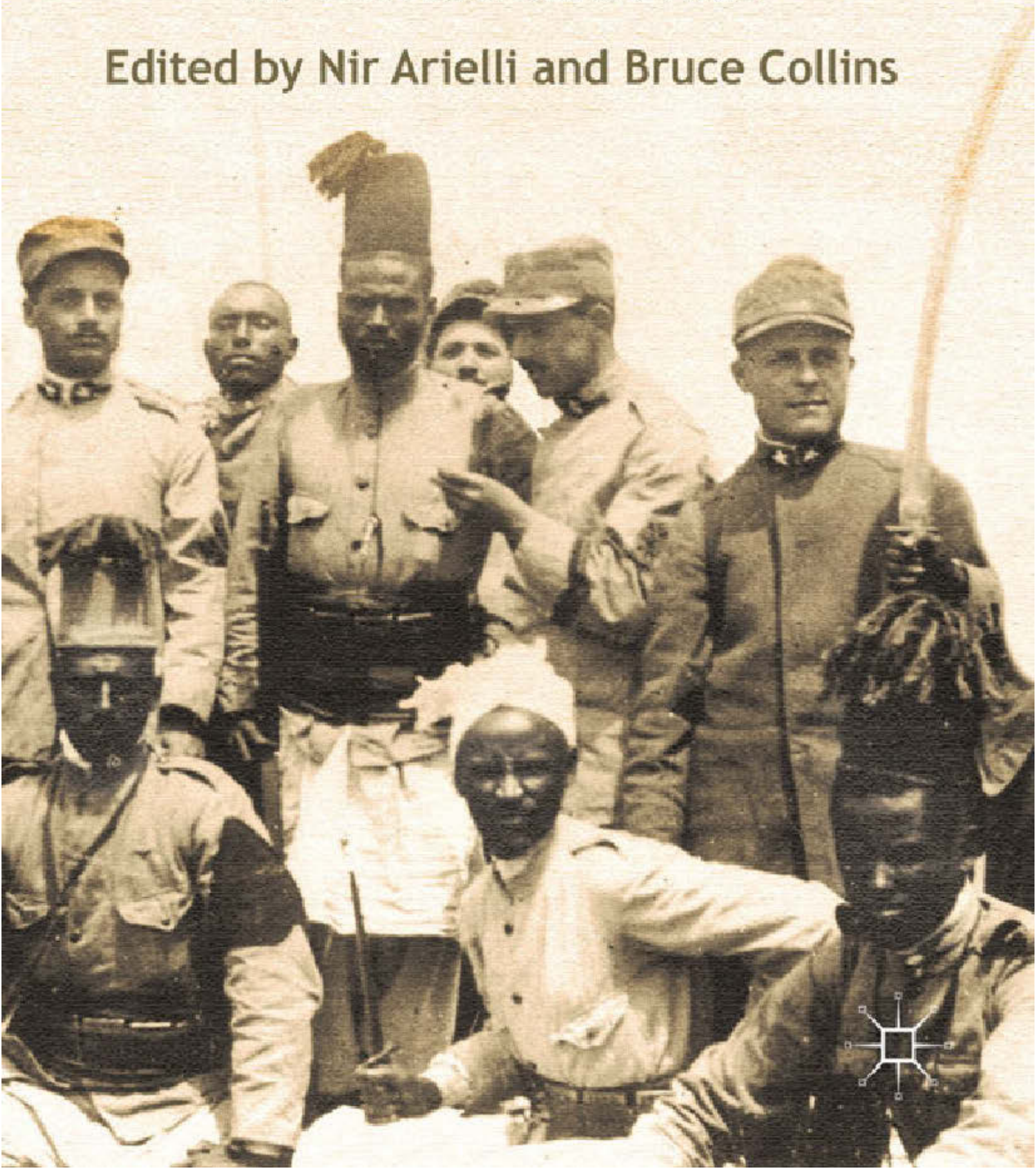
TRANSNATIONAL SOLDIERS

FOREIGN MILITARY ENLISTMENT IN THE MODERN ERA

Edited by Nir Arielli and Bruce Collins



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Edited by

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The idea for this volume was born in a corridor conversation when Nir Arielli held a one-year postdoctoral research fellowship in history at Sheffield Hallam University in 2009. With financial assistance from the university's Humanities Research Centre, we organized a one-day workshop in November 2009 to explore the subject of transnational military volunteering. The workshop was attended by 14 participants, and we were particularly encouraged to take the project further by Holger Afflerbach (Leeds), Matthew Stibbe (Sheffield Hallam) and Martin Thomas (Exeter). From this initial exploration, we approached potential contributors and secured a book contract from Palgrave, where Jenny McCall and Clare Mence have been most supportive throughout the subsequent publication process. A second workshop, in June 2011, was held to present and discuss the contributors' chapters. Eight contributors were able to attend, and we were joined by seven others, including three colleagues from Sheffield Hallam – Peter Cain, Antony Taylor and Marie-Cecile Thoral – who acted as commentators on individual sessions. Their suggestions and advice were most helpful. Again, the Humanities Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam provided the financial assistance for the workshop. We are very grateful to the contributors for their willingness to explore the subject of transnational volunteering and their promptness in meeting our various deadlines. We would also like to thank Josie McLellan (Bristol), Matthew Frank (Leeds) and Neil Fleming (Worcester) for their helpful comments on individual chapters in this volume, and Katrin Streicher for her work on the cover image.

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1

Introduction: Transnational Military Service since the Eighteenth Century

Nir Arielli and Bruce Collins

The nature and implications of military service have been extensively debated in recent years. While since the end of the Cold War non-state conflicts have become more prominent, the period from the French revolutionary *levée en masse* in 1793 to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 has often been depicted as one in which the mass, largely conscripted and nationally defined army provided the model for military mobilization. Indeed, until the 1990s, the history of military mobilization was traditionally treated in a fairly linear fashion. Professional and limited in size, the armies of the *ancien régime* were essentially drawn from the two opposite ends of the social scale and often incorporated mercenaries from foreign lands or relied on additional battalions hired from other states. Conversely, twentieth-century armies were large, mostly based on systematic conscription, and rooted in ideas of the national state, in whose service citizens were obliged, or at least encouraged, to fight. The exact starting point of the transition from the former to the latter is disputed. Let us first of all examine the evolution of mass recruitment from within the territories of states. Peter the Great introduced an early form of conscription in Russia in 1705.[1] There were also eighteenth-century attempts to widen military service in Prussia. These arose from a particular conjunction of factors. A small population and a financially poor state created difficulties for an ambitious monarchy, trying to expand its territories in a region without natural frontiers and exposed to greater powers. The only way for Prussia – and for other German states that followed suit – to compete militarily was to compel military service. Conscripts were cheaper and more readily available.

The traditional military history narrative, at least as far as Europe is concerned, sees the French Revolution as an important turning point in the 'nationalization' of military service.[2] The Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789) stressed that the security of both citizens and their rights requires public military forces, established for the good of all rather than the personal advantage of the sovereign. The declaration also stipulated that a common contribution was essential for the maintenance of these public forces. Writing a few decades later, Clausewitz remarked that in 1793 war had 'suddenly become an affair of the people', all of whom regarded themselves as citizens of the state. Whereas in the past war had been a cabinet affair, now a whole nation with its 'natural weight' came into the scale.[3] Citizens had a stake in the defence of their state with military service becoming a symbol of model citizenship. The first defenders of the revolution were volunteers, mostly of bourgeois background. When their number proved insufficient, the Republic attempted to call up the entire male population capable of bearing arms. As the social composition of the military changed, so did its image. The armed forces, composed as they were of sons, brothers and husbands, were – or were supposed to be – the subject of the population's admiration rather than fear.[4]

The explosion of ideas from the 1790s and early 1800s has prompted Russell Weigley to see in the *levée en masse* 'the first forging of the thunderbolt of a new kind of war – the total war of nations pitting against each other all their resources and passion'.[5] Similarly, for David Bell, the Republic's leaders fought 'not simply to defeat France's enemies but to destroy them and to absorb the broken pieces of their regimes into new configurations of power'. Additionally, war became a higher calling, for the extirpation of evil was a necessary preliminary to an age of international stability and peace.[6] According to Geoffrey Best, Napoleon's conquests inadvertently exported the notions of the nationalization of war and 'the militarization of national feeling' beyond the frontiers of France so that they 'burst out all over Europe in the winter of 1812–13'.[7]

However, the move to mass conscription, the strict linkage between state, nation, citizen and soldier, and the insistence on the 1790s and 1800s as a revolutionary turning point in military affairs have been called into question. For example, Deborah Avant has argued that the shift to conscript armies and the accompanying cult of the citizen-soldier flowed essentially from specific political responses to military pressures. France in 1793 and Prussia after 1806 reacted to threatened or actual defeat by embracing conscription because their political leadership was in flux and their governments desperately sought military expedients which could not be found by adherence to the military status quo. Avant concluded that 'Without the Prussian interpretation of the battles of Jena and Auerstadt as demonstrations of the superior fighting capability of citizens, the path toward small professional armies might not have been abandoned'. The success of French conscript armies in 1793–97 and of the Prussian *levée en masse* in 1813–14 vindicated the experiment and established a new military model.[8] A different line of criticism has been offered by Arthur Waldron, who concluded a volume of essays on the subject by stressing that the idea of the *levée* was more powerful than the reality. Across a wide range of examples in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the *levée* in reality was brief, partial and contested.[9] Even during the wars of 1792–1815 the development of mass, national armies has been qualified by Ute Planert. Large armies were formed, but they were not necessarily in being for long periods. National feelings were aroused, but soldiers deserted in substantial numbers, even from the French armies. Conscription came into force, but exemptions from service were widely obtained.[10]

Recent research has, therefore, cast doubts about the linear development of conscription as a direct consequence of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. After 1815, as militarism became unpopular, Prussia alone among the European states retained universal military service without exemption or substitution. Instead, it was the international crises and short wars of the 1850s and 1860s that ushered in a new era of powerful states and more widespread conscription. However, even this shift was not universal. Britain did not turn to conscription until 1916 and even then only temporarily. In many countries beyond Europe and North America the 'nationalization' of military service and the creation of a heroic image of the citizen-soldier did not take place before the second half of the twentieth century. In China, for instance, the negative Confucian perception of soldiery persisted until, under Mao, the old proverb 'Do not waste good iron for nails or good men for soldiers' was replaced by a new heroic victor narrative.[11]

Let us turn now to cross-border mercenary service, which was unexceptionable before the late eighteenth century. Was the 1917 *Enciclopedia universal ilustrada europeo-americana* of Madrid correct in stating that 'Since the Napoleonic Wars, the use of mercenary troops seems to have disappeared for ever'?[12]

The shift from professional armies that relied heavily on mercenaries to national armies can partially be explained through changes in the political landscape and improvements in infrastructure. The golden age of mercenary mobilization in Europe coincided with a period when continental borders were ill-defined and persistently contested. Since so much fighting occurred in central Europe, the obvious place to recruit men was from among the numerous, mostly small and weak, Germanic states and in neighbouring areas. This system became unsustainable after 1815. There were far fewer states in central Europe, while Prussia had expanded its territory and population appreciably. Consequently, the transfer market in military service contracted with the disappearance of early modern recruitment loci. Apart from the increased 'national' self-consciousness of the governments of the principal states, transport links were faster and more plentiful, making it easier for continental European governments to raise troops from within their own territories and move them swiftly to their borderlands and the seats of war. Not only did Prussian territorial expansion and military wariness make it difficult for non-German powers to recruit within the reduced number of minor German states, but better roads and the spread of railways in continental Europe made it less important to do so.

Janice Thomson argues that states played a more purposive role in eliminating mercenarism. Governments wanted to avoid being unwittingly dragged into foreign conflicts. The U.S. Neutrality Act of 1794, emulated as it was by other countries, heralded a gradual change in international norms that made states responsible for the actions of their citizens, a process which led to the placing of restrictions on foreign enlistment and recruitment. By extending their right to control citizens' actions not just within a country but also beyond their boundaries, states during the nineteenth century suppressed large-scale mercenary mobilization. Greater state authority and stronger links between citizen and state not only created the notion of the citizen-soldier but also destroyed the legality and credibility of the mercenary.[13]

However, 'non-state' mobilization did not disappear. A recent volume of essays has questioned the conventional assumption that violence in the modern era has been exercised primarily under 'public' control, emphasizing the persistence of 'private' expressions of violence by mercenaries, pirates and bandits. According to Tarak Barkawi, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did not witness a 'world of Weberian states' with territorial monopolies on the legitimate use of force. During the Cold War, for instance, both the USA and the USSR advanced their interests by providing wide-ranging 'advice and support' for client armies and insurgents around the world. Thus, the 'coercive power of states has international and transnational dimensions which call into question the adequacy of the idea of the territorial monopolies as a way of thinking about the global organization of force and state power'.[14]

The present volume goes a step further. One of its aims is to show that the break with the early modern past was not sharp and universal. The history of military mobilization does not fit neatly into national boxes, not even in the modern era. In fact, the movement from mixed eighteenth-century armies to national armies has often been described in historically inaccurate terms. Governments and military commanders were often forced to turn to transnational recruitment as a result of severe manpower shortages. Napoleon's armies were far from homogeneous in composition. Half the army he led into Russia in 1812 consisted of Germans, Poles, Italians and many others. In the late 1810s and early 1820s thousands of Europeans fought in the armies of Simón Bolívar against the Spanish in the wars of national liberation in Latin America.[15] Soldiers from non-combatant states took part in the Greek war against the Ottoman Empire in the 1820s, the internal struggles in the Iberian Peninsula in the 1830s and the war between Uruguay and the Argentine Confederation in the 1840s.[16] Later, recruitment from among enemy prisoners of war, which the international conventions of The Hague (1907) and Geneva (1929) sought to abolish, was still practised extensively in both World Wars.[17] During World War II, the *Waffen-SS* recruited men of German extraction from outside Germany, including Holland, Hungary and Romania, as well as non-Germans in the Baltic states, Albania, Yugoslavia and elsewhere.[18] Exiled Polish pilots took part in the defence of Britain in 1940 and deserting Japanese soldiers and officers were recruited by the Vietminh to assist in the struggle against the French Expeditionary Corps from late 1945 until the early 1950s. As with many other foreign troops since the late eighteenth century, their military contribution was down-played in post-war national histories.[19]

The ambiguities around transnational recruitment and expanded state authority were particularly marked in the mobilization of colonial peoples. When European powers expanded overseas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries they tended to use small armies of European soldiers. Indigenous peoples often joined invading armies as allies, to secure advantages in local power struggles, but they were rarely integrated into colonizing armies. Once non-settler colonies grew in geographical extent, it became increasingly difficult to protect and extend them by using only European troops. By the 1790s, the British East India Company operated three armies in India consisting principally of 80,000 locally recruited sepoys. By the mid-1820s those numbers had grown to 230,000 sepoys.[20] In their Caribbean island colonies, the British in the 1800s created West Indian regiments of slaves and ex-slaves to meet a regional manpower crisis; these men were less prone to tropical diseases, notably yellow fever and malaria, which speedily killed European troops in the Caribbean.[21] Various kinds of indigenous recruitment flourished in the nineteenth century. It would be mistaken to dismiss such a phenomenon as a distant 'colonial' aberration. Controlling the British Empire, which in 1923 covered 23 per cent of the world's land area and which included India, the world's second most populous country, was no peripheral task. The British Army in nineteenth-century India, as has often been stressed, was the largest regular army in the world, and it consisted of volunteers who were not citizens. During World War I, that army swelled to more than two million troops, without conscription. Judging from their letters, these soldiers fought above all to gain and preserve *izzat* – their honour, standing, reputation or prestige.[22] Any notion that they were mere colonial subjects serving their sovereign authority requires at the least refinement if not reconsideration. An important source for the recruitment of Indian sepoys from the 1820s was the region of Oudh (Awadh), which did not become part of British India until 1856. During and after the Mutiny-Rebellion of 1857–59 the locus of recruitment shifted to the Punjab, which was annexed by the British only in 1849, and Nepal, which remained outside the empire and continues to furnish Gurkha volunteers for the British Army today. Similarly ambiguous patterns of military mobilization occurred elsewhere. From 1882 the British exerted considerable influence in Egypt without ever establishing sovereignty over that principality. They created the Anglo-Egyptian army of 20,000 troops by the late 1890s. This force played a critical role in the subjugation of the Sudan in 1898.[23] Yet while it contributed significantly to the British projection of regional power, this army was neither an Egyptian national force nor a British colonial entity.

The recruitment of non-Europeans was not confined to the British. The French established a specialist colonial warfare force in their Foreign Legion, based in Algeria but deployable elsewhere in the French empire. Local people were mobilized into African and South East Asian regiments to defend the colonies that France had acquired. During World War II hundreds of thousands of North and West Africans were deployed by the French first in Italy and later in France. It is often forgotten that the two most dramatic defeats suffered by the British and French in 'colonial' warfare, in the retreat from Kabul in 1842 and at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 respectively, involved imperial armies which consisted largely of non-European troops. Other European empires were not far behind. The Dutch colonial army in Indonesia became ever more reliant on Javanese and Ambonese recruits in the nineteenth century. Its Central Directorate of Training recruited and trained 13,000 local men as late as 1946–48.[24] The Italian colonial army mobilized *askaris* in Eastern Africa and was still recruiting troops in British Aden, across the Red Sea, in 1935.[25] A year later, in the Spanish Civil War, General Francisco Franco's most fearsome troops were Moroccans. Such military hybrids, continuing well into the twentieth century, severely qualify the dominant model of a fundamental shift towards citizen armies by the late nineteenth century.

The near ubiquity of transnational service in armed conflicts of the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries begs the question: when is transnational service transnational? The legal criterion of citizenship goes some way towards distinguishing between transnational soldiers and those serving their own state. Thus, the Irish-Americans who served in the Union or Confederate armies in the American Civil War cannot be treated as transnational soldiers, even though their national identities and loyalties may very well have been fluid.[26] On the other hand, Irishmen who were recruited in Ireland to fight in America or the British sailors who served on board the Confederate steamer *Alabama* can be categorized as transnational soldiers because they were not citizens of either of the warring entities when they enlisted. Accordingly, UN troops should be considered as international rather than transnational military personnel because they are citizen-soldiers, who officially represent sovereign states, and are deployed abroad with the authorization of their governments. However, a classification of national and transnational soldiers based solely on citizenship has its limitations. Globally, the transition from subjects to citizens has been gradual and uneven. A clear case can be made that the revolutionary rhetoric of 1793 forged a political and perhaps emotional connection, at least for a time, between the newly uplifted French citizen-soldier and the nation he was required enthusiastically and willingly to defend. But did the 40 per cent of the soldiers of the British Army in 1830 who were Irishmen share an analogous sense of serving a nation in which they were respected citizens? Did the Slav majority of privates in the Austro-Hungarian army of the late nineteenth century regard themselves as citizen-soldiers in a force whose officer corps belonged mainly to the German minority in the empire and whose commands were in German? These subject-soldiers constituted a transitional group who were not technically mercenaries – they served their own state and they were often conscripted – but who were not citizens in the French revolutionary or modern senses of that term. Instead, they formed national minority populations within larger political entities. Hence, we are left with a complex reality where black, white and a few shades of grey co-exist.

The continued persistence of mercenarism and other forms of transnational mobilization in turn raises questions about volunteers' motivations and choices. A great deal of work has been done on the related questions of why men and women join armies and why, once they experience the realities of campaigning and fighting, they continue to serve in them. The findings on volunteering for national armies offer mixed and tentative explanations. The strongest impulse for volunteering in a national cause arises when a country is invaded or seems to be in imminent danger of invasion. For example, the threat of a French invasion of England in 1803–05 stimulated military volunteering by hundreds of thousands of men. National humiliation without any threat of invasion of the homeland also spurred volunteering, as during so-called 'Black Week' in December 1899 when the Boer republics inflicted three battlefield defeats on British forces in southern Africa. This response could be seen as a manifestation of a 'British world' view, in which attacks upon British subjects in Natal and Cape Colony were perceived as threats to British subjects anywhere. More than 100,000 men from the UK, as well as significant contingents from the Australian colonies, from New Zealand and from Canada, fought in South Africa in 1900–02 (though the volunteers from the settler colonies, another grey-zone category, were also spurred by reasons specific to their societies).[27] In August 1914 British volunteering accelerated when news from the Battle of Mons suggested that the Germans might break the French armies and open the way to an invasion of mainland Britain. Fears of encirclement and Russian aggression provided the generalized threat to which Germans responded in the crisis of that summer.[28] The sense of external threat could thus be the result of long-standing rivalries and tensions rather than the reaction to immediate or discrete events. Men who joined border protection units in eastern Prussia in the 1920s were motivated by a fear of local Polish assertiveness in a region where Poles had long been suppressed by the Germans.[29]

In fact, it is possible to offer various explanations for volunteering: a sense of patriotic duty, particularly in a crisis, and a reaction to threats from alien ethnic or national groups were often accompanied by a response to pressure from peers or social superiors, or an acceptance of financial rewards. The above-average volunteering by British professional men in 1914–16 arose, in part, from peer pressure and the intensity of expectation that men of 'position' in society should lead by example in answering national calls to serve. For poorer men, or the unemployed, material inducements may well have been decisive.[30] A sense of adventure or a longing to get away from an inhibiting environment at home can also be cited as motivating factors. For women and religious or ethnic minorities, the hope of achieving integration, emancipation, equality and acceptance was often a central reason for volunteering.[31] Linking these varying impulses was public discourse about the reciprocal obligations of citizen to state, newly defined from the 1790s and vigorously disseminated by the late nineteenth century. Service in the military became a moral obligation, a badge of good citizenship and an attribute of fellow-feeling within both local and national communities.

Such civic idealism, or at least the sense of acceptable obligation, was less easy to sustain once citizen-soldiers became immersed in prolonged campaigning. At some point, most conscripts or volunteers encountered boredom, frustration or even disillusionment with the grand objectives or ideals which accompanied their entry into active military service. Professional self-respect, reciprocal support for fellow-soldiers in the platoon or company and possibly the regiment, and perhaps professional pride in soldiering provided the psychological glue holding individuals to their military duties. The overwhelming evidence of soldiers in action indicates that small-group identity and camaraderie rather than broad ideological commitments explains military cohesion in war.[32]

How far are these conclusions from the study of national volunteering compatible with the phenomenon of transnational volunteering? We start with the initial definitional challenge that eighteenth-century volunteering has been categorized as mercenarism, and thus linked with mere financial motivations. Yet mercenaries are usually also described as acceptably efficient troops, thus opening up the possibility that mercenarism might have been the outcome of individuals' dedication to the military life and indeed to military professionalism as much as the pursuit of income. The first section of this volume seeks to tackle these and other issues. The motivations and wartime experiences of eighteenth-century German recruits who fought in North America, India and the Dutch Empire are examined in the chapters by Daniel Krebs and Chen Tzoref Ashkenazi. The chapter by Kevin Linch assesses transnational mobilization in the British Army during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Not all of the soldiers analysed in this section would have described themselves as mercenaries. In some cases they were part of an army hired out by one state to another. In the 1790s and early 1800s, foreign recruits could be motivated by counter-revolutionary ideals or anti-French sentiments and not merely by the prospect of financial gain. More broadly, the section highlights how traditional, institutionalized early modern foreign recruitment began to change form in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as a result of the growth of European imperialism and the advent of political nationalism.

Since the nineteenth century, transnational service has taken on a number of forms. As the volume's second section illustrates, the gradual disappearance of mercenary armies in Europe was offset by a growing reliance on colonial troops. The case study of nineteenth-century British India is analysed by Bruce Collins while Daniel Spence looks at colonial recruits in the Royal Navy during World War II and Christian Koller focuses on recruitment practices in the French Foreign Legion. These chapters combine a top-down approach, assessing the rationale, interests, anxieties and racial prejudices of military leaders commanding transnational forces, with a bottom-up approach that looks at enlistment from the perspective of transnational soldiers and sailors. In this two-way process, reflections will be offered on the impact of ideas about martial races disseminated by Victorians and their European contemporaries, and developed well into the twentieth century.

The end of multinational empires has given rise to another form of transnational mobilization. The volume's third section examines the phenomenon of military service in armies constituted or reconstituted in the wake of a colonial power's withdrawal or collapse. Tomas Balkelis traces the establishment of the Lithuanian army at the end of World War I. Here, officers who were demobilized from the imperial Russian army found themselves fighting alongside German volunteer units against the invading Red Army. Nicholas Farrelly examines the transnational military labour market in Burma and Thailand in the second half of the twentieth century while Miles Larmer shows how the changing identity of the Katangese gendarmes transcended postcolonial state borders in central Africa and their military involvement crossed the ideological boundaries of the Cold War. These case studies of cross-border military service highlight soldiers' national, factional, ethnic, financial and ideological motives for fighting. Thus the chapters represent an analytical shift from a focus on the state's service to choices as to who an individual or particular groups might serve.

The fourth section of the volume is focused on transnational soldiers who do not fall into the colonial or the borderland categories. A central theme in this section is the novel phenomenon of transnational volunteers for whom ideology was a motivating factor. Ideological volunteering can be considered specifically modern first because it was often inspired by ideologies which did not exist before the modern era such as nineteenth-century radicalism or twentieth-century communism and fascism. Second, within the nineteenth- and twentieth-century contexts of citizens' obligations, hardening interstate borders, and increasing national and international limitations on foreign enlistment, the position of individuals who chose to fight in another country without leave from their government has no parallel in early modern warfare. Martin Robson explores the actions and motivations of British volunteers who intervened in the First Carlist War in Spain in the 1830s. The chapter by Marcella Pellegrino Sutcliffe examines the origins and experiences of English volunteers who joined Giuseppe Garibaldi in the campaigns of the Risorgimento in southern Italy. Nir Arielli assesses the push and pull factors which combined to bring men and women to join the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. The role of coercion and the struggle for survival in creating transnational soldiers is tackled by Dónal O'Sullivan. He examines a group of Soviet World War II POWs who were made to join the German army and, following their second capture, the Allied cause. The concluding chapter of the volume shows how, in addition to ideology, feelings of kinship, religious affinity and 'long-distance nationalism' among diaspora communities have influenced transnational volunteers. It also examines the increased presence of transnational military contractors since the end of the Cold War.

The long-term dimension of non-national participation in warfare enables us to understand the context from which contemporary transnational involvement in non-state conflicts has emerged. For instance, the desire to assist in the struggle of co-religionists, with dramatic examples from recent years, arguably preserves a form of mobilization which dates back to the Crusades, if not earlier. This critique of the state-centred approach to modern military mobilization is part of a wider deconstruction of what Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller called 'methodological nationalism'. As they and many others in recent years have shown, the assumption that the nation-state provides the natural social and political form of the modern world resulted in a limiting of the analytical horizon and a removal of transborder connections and processes from the picture.[33] Far from exhausting all the different aspects and case studies of the multifaceted phenomenon of transnational military mobilization, the contributions in this volume, with their comparative and long durée approach, aim to provide an incentive for further research.

Notes

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6. David A. Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (London, 2008), pp. 160, 184, 190–91, 207, 310–11, 316.

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12. Cited in: Christine G. Krüger and Sonja Levsen, 'Introduction: Volunteers, War, and the Nation since the French Revolution', in C. G. Krüger and S. Levsen (eds), *War Volunteering in Modern Times: From the French Revolution to the Second World War* (Basingstoke, 2011), p. 12.
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15. Matthew Brown, *Adventuring through Spanish Colonies: Simón Bolívar, Foreign Mercenaries and the Birth of New Nations* (Liverpool, 2006).
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30. Watson, 'Voluntary Enlistment in the Great War', pp. 167–72, 176.
31. Krüger and Levsen, 'Introduction', in *War Volunteering*, p. 7.
32. See for example, Joshua Goldstein, *War and Gender* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 161.
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Section I

Re-examining the Decline of Mercenary Armies, 1776–1815

2

Desperate for Soldiers: The Recruitment of German Prisoners of War during the American War of Independence, 1776–83

Daniel Krebs

Johann Conrad Döhla, a common soldier in the Ansbach-Bayreuth Regiment von Seybothen, was an astute observer. In a detailed journal, this veteran chronicled what happened to him and his fellow-soldiers from the Holy Roman Empire while they served as British subsidy troops during the American War of Independence.[1] Taken captive at Lord Cornwallis' surrender of Yorktown on 19 October 1781, Döhla and fellow-soldiers from four German regiments were brought to Frederick, Maryland, and stayed there in captivity until 1783.[2] About one year into their captivity, at the end of September 1782, Döhla noted a strange sight in town. Fifty German prisoners of war were led out of town after they had enlisted with revolutionary American troops. Over several weeks, American recruitment officers had come into the captives' barracks with 'music and also women'.[3] On 22 October 1782, one of Döhla's superiors, Lieutenant Johann Ernst Prechtel, reported on another transport of 20 recruits from the four captive German regiments in Frederick.[4] A few days before Christmas, on 21 December 1782, Döhla saw about 40 former Ansbach-Bayreuth soldiers who had signed up with yet another revolutionary American unit, Charles Armand Tuffin's Legion, and guarded a number of captured British soldiers, their former comrades, while marching through town.[5]

Why did American revolutionaries recruit German prisoners of war for their struggle against King George III and his armies? When the conflict between 13 English colonies in North America and the British motherland erupted in April 1775, revolutionary leaders in Congress and elsewhere wanted to fight with citizen-soldiers who rose in defence of their homes and joined militia units to push back British tyranny. In their *Declaration of Independence* on 4 July 1776, the colonies listed as one of their main grievances that George III had hired thousands of German subsidy troops, 'large Armies of foreign Mercenaries', to complete 'the works of death, desolation and tyranny ... scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation'.[6] If those Germans, professional soldiers from European standing armies, embodied everything the colonists believed was wrong about the British Empire, how had they become suitable recruits by 1781?

Manpower needs

The great military enthusiasm that swept through the colonial population in 1775, particularly in New England, soon subsided and the Continental Army suffered from severe manpower shortages after 1776.[7] It became clear that those revolutionary colonists who were actually willing to serve in the military were motivated less by patriotism than by other factors such as bounties, pay, food and shelter.[8] The solution was to create a European-style standing army of trained and drilled soldiers who had to serve for three years or the duration of the war.[9] Congress and the states, then, were forced to search for military wage labourers, men who were willing to serve professionally in an army.[10] But recruitment campaigns repeatedly brought fewer soldiers into the army than were needed.[11] This lack of recruits prompted both Congress and the states to look for recruits among parts of the population previously considered unreliable.[12]

In this situation, it was not surprising that the revolutionaries would eventually also turn toward enemy captives as potential recruits. This was, after all, common practice in every early modern European army.[13] In fact, Pennsylvania revolutionaries had already recruited among the very first British prisoners of war in their hands. At Fort Chambly, on 18 October 1775, and during the Siege of Fort Saint-Jean between September and 3 November 1775, revolutionary forces invading Canada under generals Montgomery and Arnold captured hundreds of British troops from the 7th (Royal Fusiliers) and 26th (Cameronian) Regiments of Foot. Congress ordered on 17 November 1775 that these prisoners of war be kept in Reading, York, Carlisle and Lancaster in Pennsylvania.[14] In January 1776, American recruiters recruited a drummer and sergeant from these prisoners.[15]

Members of Congress and General Washington strongly opposed such recruitment campaigns among captives. These revolutionary leaders believed that soldiers or prisoners who had defected from the enemy could not be trusted and were thus unfit for American military service.[16] In 1778, Congress stated explicitly, 'experience hath proved that no confidence can be placed in prisoners of war or deserters from the enemy, who inlist into the Continental Army; but many losses and great mischiefs have frequently happened by them'.[17] General Washington ordered on 5 February 1781 that revolutionary recruitment officers were not allowed 'to Inlist any Deserter from the enemy, nor any person of Disaffected or Suspicious character, with Respect of the Government of these States'.[18]