

# Levée en Masse

by Ambrogio A. Caiani

When faced, in 1793, with the prospect of defeat, the National Convention issued an appeal for a levée en masse, which, theoretically, placed the entire population at the disposal of France's war machine. Thus was born the modern idea of the nation in arms. This concept has proved to have an enduring legacy, and has been adapted to suit a wide variety of contexts and time periods. This article explores the birth, development and transmission of the levée en masse. It seeks to understand why the concept survived beyond the 1790s and how it remained a compelling instrument of mass mobilisation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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## The Creation of the *Levée en Masse*

The first four years of the French Revolution created turmoil in the nation's armies, and were characterised by revolt, mutiny, counter-revolution, and largescale emigration within the aristocratic officer corps.<sup>1</sup> The catastrophic defeat of General Charles François Du Périer Dumouriez (1739–1823) (→ Media Link #ab) at Neerwinden in March 1793 seemed to nullify the effects of previous army reform and brought back the spectre of foreign invasion.<sup>2</sup> The *levée en masse* of 23 August 1793 was the French Convention's direct response to this looming crisis. It ambitiously declared that:

▲ 1

From this moment and until all enemies are driven from the territory of the Republic all French persons are placed in permanent requisition for the service of the armies. The young men will go to battle, married men will forge arms and transport provisions; women will make tents and clothing and serve in the hospitals; children will shred old linen; old men will have themselves carried to public places to arouse the courage of warriors and preach the hatred of kings and the unity of the Republic.<sup>3</sup>

(→ Media Link #ac) At its most apparent and superficial level, this compelling and extraordinary legislation sought to assemble recruits for an army of 750,000 men, and to create a logistic framework of sufficient magnitude to support such an unprecedented military establishment.<sup>4</sup> Although these tangible goals were of fundamental importance, this mass mobilisation was to be much more than a mere drive to extract manpower and strategic resources from the French population.

▲ 2

Compulsory military service, or at least the sovereign's right to compel his subjects to enlist in the armed forces, was nothing new in either French or European history. Indeed, the *ancien régime* monarchy's imperfect recruitment and militia system had enabled France to field some of the largest armies of the early modern period.<sup>5</sup> Despite the apparent achievements of Louis XIV's (1638–1715) (→ Media Link #ad) armies during the *grand siècle*, by the late eighteenth century it was felt that fundamental reforms were necessary.<sup>6</sup> Military analysts like Joseph Servan (1731–1807) (→ Media Link #ae) and the counts of Guibert (Charles Benoît, 1715–1786), and Saint Germain (Claude Louis, 1707–1778) (→ Media Link #af), affirmed that institutional reorganisation, or the introduction of Prussian-style tactics

and discipline, was insufficient to break the stagnation into which venality, poor leadership and ill-trained troops had plunged the royal army-of-the-line.<sup>7</sup> A new military 'spirit' had to be instilled into the nation at large.

▲3

These writers, inspired by classical antiquity, believed that, through education and training, the subjects of the king could be transformed into citizen soldiers. Universal military service in an enlightened polity placed the entire population of the nation at the disposal of the state, thus providing a potentially inexhaustible source of manpower. It was further hoped that these troops, who were patriotic, intelligent and highly-motivated, would be able to decisively influence the outcome of any battle. This proposal was certainly inspired by the Enlightenment's broader strategy of defining a new civic identity, which would expand participation in public administration and thus create a more benign system of governance.<sup>8</sup>

▲4

The *levée en masse* was the culmination of this long-standing call for the creation of a new military culture. The Constituent Assembly had already introduced the principle of merit in the promotion system of officers. There had also been experiments in creating volunteer legions and a more humane code of military discipline. Despite the publicity accorded to these innovations, their efficacy on the battlefield failed to materialise.<sup>9</sup> The fall of the Constitutional Monarchy and the radicalisation of Republican politics gradually allowed the Jacobins to urge more far-reaching reforms.<sup>10</sup> They felt that previous attempts had not gone far enough in bringing the spirit and energy of the 1789 Revolution to the army. They viewed with suspicion bordering on obsession the remaining noble officers and white-uniformed veterans of the old royal army. They were certain that battlefield failures were due to a refusal, on the part of traditional elements within the military, to push forward reforms. Only by imbuing the army with revolutionary zeal could this situation be reversed.

▲5

The Jacobins claimed the *levée en masse* was not an instrument of state coercion, but an extraordinary recruitment measure intended to harness the French people's pre-existing enthusiasm, patriotic fervour and ideological commitment to the Revolution.<sup>11</sup> The *levée* was a complex formula in which political ideology was transformed into a secret weapon which would ultimately result in the Revolution's triumph over *ancien régime* despotism.

▲6

The dissymmetry between the physical reality and the ideological claims of the *levée* has been the subject of significant debate and controversy. Although many historians dispute the actual numbers of the army created in 1793, few would dispute that this force, of roughly 600,000 men, was the backbone of France's subsequent successes and eventual military breakthrough in 1796.<sup>12</sup> It is worth recalling, however, that the *levée* did not make provision for a system of annual conscription. This innovation was introduced by the Jourdan law of 12 January 1798, which replenished, on a yearly basis, the ranks of the French army. The Napoleonic *Grande Armée* was to be a composite force, made-up of veterans of the 1793 *levée* and fresh recruits.<sup>13</sup>

▲7

Also of interest is the earnest manner in which both supporters and enemies of the Revolution perceived the threat posed by this new ideologico-military apparatus. Theorists of modern warfare of future renown, such as Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) (→ Media Link #ag) and Baron Antoine Henri de Jomini (1779–1869) (→ Media Link #ah) accepted, without much reservation, the effectiveness of France's innovations.<sup>14</sup> They defined these new phenomena as wars of opinion, or national wars, in a quest to create rigid typologies, which would finally uncover the essential nature of 'War' and thus unlock the secrets of ultimate victory. It was the highly persuasive nature of the *levée* which allowed for its slow diffusion and adoption, not only in Europe, but in the wider world. What is certainly less clear is whether the actual experience of campaigning, or fighting in battle, was transformed by such claims.<sup>15</sup>

▲8

Studies on desertion and resistance to conscription show how fragile the credibility of the *levée* could be when confronted with the hostility of peasant archaism and other regional particularisms.<sup>16</sup> It is also uncertain whether the citizen soldier represented a qualitative leap in the actual experience of soldiering. Depressingly, the enduring efficacy and professionalism of mercenaries would seem to work against this assumption. Indeed, the troops of *ancien régime* princes resisted the onslaught of France's revolutionary forces for the better part of a decade.

## The Dissemination of the *Levée en Masse* throughout Europe

The subsequent military reorganisation of the principal *ancien régime* armies by aristocratic officials, like Reichsfreiherr Heinrich Friedrich Karl vom und zum Stein (1757–1831) (→ Media Link #ai), Gerhard Johann David von Scharnhorst (1755–1813) (→ Media Link #aj), Count August Wilhelm Anton Neidhardt von Gneisenau (1760–1831) (→ Media Link #ak), Archduke Charles of Austria (1771–1847) (→ Media Link #al) and Prince Michael Andreas Barclay de Tolly (1761–1818) (→ Media Link #am), was a direct response to a perceived French martial superiority.<sup>17</sup> It is equally important to stress that these reforms were not a straightforward adoption of the revolutionary model or ethos, and that each state refashioned the idea of the nation in arms to suit its specific cultural context and political agenda. For example, Peter Paret's important study concerning the role of General Count Hans David Ludwig Yorck von Wartenburg (1759–1830) (→ Media Link #an) in the resurgence of Prussia, a figure previously viewed as an obscurantist reactionary, has shown that his improvements in light infantry tactics made a significant contribution to battlefield performance.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the increased use of irregular troops in the Spanish *Guerrillas* and the German *Erhebung* of 1813 represented specific regional variations on the original 1793 concept of the *levée*.<sup>19</sup> Their contribution to Napoleon's ultimate defeat, like the *levée*, remains a much debated issue.<sup>20</sup>

▲10

An equally significant evolution lies in the manner in which autocratic monarchs, like Friedrich Wilhelm III (1770–1840) (→ Media Link #ao) or Alexander I (1777–1825) (→ Media Link #ap), appealed to their subjects directly in order to associate their dynastic interests with the patriotic indignation elicited by French aggression.<sup>21</sup> The manifesto issued by Alexander I in 1812 is a clear instance of this discursive shift:

▲11

The enemy has crossed our frontiers and is continuing to carry his arms into Russia, seeking to shake the foundations of this great power by his might and seductions ... We now appeal to all our loyal subjects, to all estates and conditions both spiritual and temporal, to rise up with us in a united and universal stand against the enemy's schemes and endeavours ... Brave descendants of courageous Slavs! You always smashed the teeth of the lions and tigers who sought to attack you. Let everyone unite: with the Cross in your hearts and weapons in your hands no human force will defeat you.<sup>22</sup>

These words highlight the sheer conceptual malleability of the *levée*. Like the declaration of 1793, this manifesto clearly tries to harness the power of an entire people voluntarily rising up against an invader who threatens to visit upon them not only material destruction, but virtual cultural annihilation. However, unlike its Jacobin and secular counterpart, the defence of the fatherland is inextricably linked to the protection of Orthodox Christianity. The power of the image of the nation in arms lies in its flexibility and adaptability. It is a compelling instrument which can be utilised in extremely different contexts and in the defence of apparently conflicting ideals. Nationalism, ethnicity, religion, dynasty, state and radical ideologies, like socialism, are all elements which have found accommodation under this wide umbrella.

▲12

Indeed, the memory of the *levée en masse* of 1793 and the application of nationwide military mobilisation was to survive well beyond the Napoleonic wars. The sovereigns of Restoration Europe maintained semi-conscript standing armies and allowed for the gradual bourgeoisification of their officer corps. In some ways the revolutionary wars achieved what the *ancien régime* dynasties had been unable to accomplish in the eighteenth century,<sup>23</sup> that is to say, the creation of a stable recruitment system to feed their standing armies on an annual basis, regardless of the regional particularisms and exemptions which continued to characterize their dominions.

▲13

During the nineteenth century the rise of romantic nationalism made the army a prime site where a sense of national/political identity could be inculcated on an apparently receptive citizenry.<sup>24</sup> This was especially the case in states which were the product of wars of unification. The Italian royal army was perceived by post-unification governments as one of the principal factories where Massimo d'Azeglio's (c. 1798–1866) (→ Media Link #aq) Italians would be manufactured.

It was believed that army service, even more than a national education curriculum, was an efficacious means of creating a common cultural identity. In 1888 the newspaper *La Riforma* proudly proclaimed that "today every Italian is a citizen, every citizen a soldier".<sup>25</sup> For the Savoy dynasty in particular, keeping a large army, well beyond both the resources and needs of their newly unified polity, was a means of reasserting their overall leadership, but also of exerting their cultural patronage over the very concept of *Italianità*.<sup>26</sup> A very similar case could be made for Wilhelmine Germany.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, much of the political tension that existed in the newly unified *Second Reich* revolved around the issue of the democratic establishment's right to influence the nature and size of the army.<sup>28</sup> It was also felt by many elite officers that mass mobilisation remained a useful counter-balance against the growing threat of radical socialism and other extremist revolutionary ideologies. To these officials, military service could re-educate the recruit and discourage him from following such unpatriotic, subversive and dangerously internationalist doctrines.<sup>29</sup>

▲ 14

This vision of the army, as the privileged breeding-ground of a sense of national identity, was not the exclusive preserve of the semi-constitutional monarchies of central Europe. France was equally interested in inculcating a sense of national republicanism into its citizenry.<sup>30</sup> Here the armed forces were a particularly fertile ground for such experiments. This was especially the case after the universal conscription law of 1905 did away with the last remaining exemptions from national service.<sup>31</sup> France was the country which had unleashed the legend of the *levée*, and was in a privileged position, as it could use this historical legacy in a more direct manner. Ernest Lavisse's (1844–1922) (→ Media Link #ar)school textbooks, and other pedagogical works, stressed the *levée* as the instrument through which Revolutionary France's glorious martial past had emerged.<sup>32</sup> They also hinted, in a far from subtle fashion, that this proud history should provide inspiration for the future. Could it not be the means of erasing the memory of the defeats of 1870 and for the recovery of the lost provinces of Alsace-Lorraine?

▲ 15

### The Decline of the *Levée*?

John Horne's work on the First World War has argued that the memory of 1793 continued to exert a powerful, if ambiguous, influence on the manner in which the Third Republic tried to justify its own attempt to mobilise the entire nation in the defence of the *Patrie*.<sup>33</sup> One of the most difficult issues to resolve in 1916, which had not been featured in the debates of the 1790s, was whether the male non-combatant was a legitimate participant in the nation's armed struggle or merely an *embusqué* shirking his duties by avoiding the dangers of the front line.<sup>34</sup> The experience of total and industrial warfare during the twentieth century, with its high casualty rates, long duration, and, in some cases, the appeal to a pseudoscientific racial nationalism, led to disillusionment with the image of the nation in arms. Some would argue that the gradual abandonment, on the part of continental Europe, of compulsory military service is evidence of the weakening appeal of the *levée*.<sup>35</sup> Such an argument, while forceful, is certainly one-sided, as it ignores the continuing appeal to popular consensus and liberal values which Western democratic states use to justify their military interventions outside their borders.

▲ 16

Furthermore, while it may be the case that mass mobilisation is no longer in vogue in Western Europe, this is certainly not the case in the wider world. Revolutionary movements in South America and post-colonial African administrations have employed variations on the original theme of the *levée* of 1793.<sup>36</sup> Ernesto "Che" Guevara (1928–1967) (→ Media Link #as) gave what was perhaps one of the most cogent redefinitions:

▲ 17

It is important to emphasise that guerrilla warfare is a war of the masses, a war of the people. The Guerrilla band, as an armed nucleus, is the combative vanguard of the people. Its great force is drawn from the mass of the people themselves. The guerrilla band should not be considered inferior to the army against which it fights, simply because it has inferior firepower. ... The Guerrilla fighter counts on the full support of the local people.<sup>37</sup>

(→ Media Link #at)There is much in this language which would have been familiar to the citizen-soldiers of 1793. Still present is the idea of mass popular support, and that the people fight spontaneously rather than through coercion. The Marxist jargon and the modern vision of economic oppression might have puzzled the Jacobins, but at its core remains

the message that he who fights for a just cause, with the support of the masses, will be triumphant even against insurmountable odds.

▲ 18

This brief survey of the transcultural impact of the *levée en masse* cannot account for all the variations in content, style, image and perception which have characterised its two centuries of existence. Anyone wishing to be exhaustive and comprehensive faces a dizzying and unnerving task in trying to come to grips with such a vast and complicated subject. It is surely this mercurial and unstable nature which has been at the heart of its adaptability and longevity. Above all else, it is the ability of the *levée* to persuade its public that it provides an effective equation through which popular sentiment is transformed into the decisive factor in the outcome of warfare that remains of fundamental importance.

▲ 19

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/gnd/118816829) ADB/NDB [↗](http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118816829.html) (http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118816829.html)

#### Link #ae

- Joseph Servan (1731–1807) VIAF [↗](http://viaf.org/viaf/56616378) [↗](http://viaf.org/viaf/56616378) (http://viaf.org/viaf/56616378) DNB [↗](http://d-nb.info/gnd/121000605) (http://d-nb.info/gnd/121000605)

#### Link #af

- Claude Louis de Saint Germain (1707–1778) VIAF [↗](http://viaf.org/viaf/13108092) [↗](http://viaf.org/viaf/13108092) (http://viaf.org/viaf/13108092) DNB [↗](http://d-nb.info/gnd/11900660X) (http://d-nb.info/gnd/11900660X)



- <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/claude-louis-comte-de-saint-germain-170720131778?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500>  
Claude Louis de Saint-Germain (1707–1778)

#### Link #ag

- Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) VIAF [↗](http://viaf.org/viaf/61543895) [↗](http://viaf.org/viaf/61543895) (http://viaf.org/viaf/61543895) DNB [↗](http://d-nb.info/gnd/11852111X) (http://d-nb.info/gnd/11852111X) ADB/NDB [↗](http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd11852111X.html) (http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd11852111X.html)



- <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/carl-von-clausewitz-178020131831?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500>  
Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831)

#### Link #ah

- Antoine Henri de Jomini (1779–1869) VIAF [↗](http://viaf.org/viaf/95148526) [↗](http://viaf.org/viaf/95148526) (http://viaf.org/viaf/95148526) DNB [↗](http://d-nb.info/gnd/118776339) (http://d-nb.info/gnd/118776339)



- [http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/copy\\_of\\_antoine-henri-jomini-177920131869?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500](http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/copy_of_antoine-henri-jomini-177920131869?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500)  
Antoine-Henri Jomini (1779–1869)

#### Link #ai

- Heinrich Friedrich Karl vom und zum Stein (1757–1831) VIAF [↗](http://viaf.org/viaf/18256525) [↗](http://viaf.org/viaf/18256525) (http://viaf.org/viaf/18256525) DNB [↗](http://d-nb.info/gnd/127792325) (http://d-nb.info/gnd/127792325)



- [http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/copy\\_of\\_heinrich-friedrich-karl-vom-und-zum-stein-175720131831?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500](http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/copy_of_heinrich-friedrich-karl-vom-und-zum-stein-175720131831?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500)  
Heinrich Friedrich Karl vom und zum Stein (1757–1831)

#### Link #aj

- Gerhard Johann David von Scharnhorst (1755–1813) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/59077626>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118606557>) ADB/NDB  (<http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118606557.html>)



- ([http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/copy\\_of\\_gerhard-johann-david-von-scharnhorst-175520131813?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500](http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/copy_of_gerhard-johann-david-von-scharnhorst-175520131813?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500))  
Gerhard Johann David von Scharnhorst (1755–1813)

#### Link #ak

- August Wilhelm Anton Neidhardt von Gneisenau (1760–1831) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/32788106>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118539957>) ADB/NDB  (<http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118539957.html>)



- ([http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/copy\\_of\\_graf-august-wilhelm-anton-neidhart-von-gneisenau-176020131831?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500](http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/copy_of_graf-august-wilhelm-anton-neidhart-von-gneisenau-176020131831?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500))  
August Wilhelm Anton Neidhart von Gneisenau (1760–1831)

#### Link #al

- Charles of Austria (1771–1847) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/69724369>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118723049>) ADB/NDB  (<http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118723049.html>)

#### Link #am

- Michael Andreas Barclay de Tolly (1761–1818) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/20477708>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118849263>) ADB/NDB  (<http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118849263.html>)

#### Link #an

- Hans David Ludwig Yorck von Wartenburg (1759–1830) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/20508533>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/120310805>) ADB/NDB  (<http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd120310805.html>)

#### Link #ao

- Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia (1770–1840) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/50016770>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118535986>) ADB/NDB  (<http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118535986.html>)

#### Link #ap

- Alexander I of Russia (1777–1825) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/4938543>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118501852>) ADB/NDB  (<http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118501852.html>)

#### Link #aq

- Massimo d'Azeglio (c. 1798–1866) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/43949>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118913298>)

#### Link #ar

- Ernest Lavisse (1844–1922) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/7392798>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118911465>)

#### Link #as

- Ernesto "Che" Guevara (1928–1967) VIAF   (<http://viaf.org/viaf/31991306>) DNB  (<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118543369>)

#### Link #at



- ([http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/copy\\_of\\_conscription-map-of-the-world-2009?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500](http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/copy_of_conscription-map-of-the-world-2009?mediainfo=1&width=900&height=500))  
Conscription map of the world 2009



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