Part I
Heroism and Self-Sacrifice
What For?
According to a common understanding, European wars in the period from the French Revolution to the mid-twentieth century were national wars. One nation attacked another and war was fought for the sake of the nation. Things seem to have completely changed today: not only has coalition warfare become the rule and wars of one nation against another much less frequent, it even appears that ‘nation-building’ – for instance in a country like Afghanistan – became part of a ‘peace building’ strategy. Thus the reference to the nation has completely changed its meaning: from a motivation for war, and even for total war, to a ground on which peace is to be built. In order to understand this apparent paradox, it is necessary to enquire what historical actors were actually talking about when invoking the nation as a motivation for fighting, for heroism and for self-sacrifice. Many scholars of the nation and of nationalism have underlined that it is quite difficult to define the nation. However, a basic understanding today seems to involve a definition of the nation as people sharing a territory, a common language and culture, as well as some community of ethnic descent. It is immediately clear that processes of globalization and of migration have effectively challenged this meaning today. However, it is the contention of this chapter that the nation was right from the onset an unstable ground for a motivation to fight and that the concept carried multiple and partly contradictory meanings that have always been incompatible with the above-outlined understanding of the nation and of nationalism. More precisely, if any motivation to fight could be derived from a reference to the nation, this term should be understood in a strictly political sense, rather than in ethnic, cultural or linguistic terms. In order to illustrate this, I will analyse some contemporary references to ‘nationalism’ as an impetus for war, derived from different contexts and by different actors: political decision-makers, public intellectuals and soldiers themselves.\textsuperscript{1}
My first example is from the time of the Seven Years War and more precisely from 1761. Prussian writer Thomas Abbt published a patriotic pamphlet entitled *Vom Tode für das Vaterland* (On Death for the Fatherland), which was, to my knowledge, the first modern expression in the German lands of the idea that the fatherland was something worth fighting and dying for. In order to make this idea acceptable, Abbt had to confront a crucial question: did Prussian subjects have a fatherland at all? The question may sound unrelated to our conceptual framework in which the nation related to culture, language, territory and ethnic descent. But the question was not without meaning in the eighteenth century. Following a traditional argument, only citizens of republics were seen to have a fatherland, whereas subjects of monarchies did not. A fatherland, and thus a nation in the modern sense, only exists when the individual is politically linked to the state.

In order to make his point and to demonstrate that Prussian subjects not only had a fatherland, but that this fatherland was even something worth dying for, Abbt had to confront the common opinion at his time that a monarchical fatherland was nothing but ‘an empty fantasy’, that is pure ideology. Abbt drew heavily on Montesquieu for whom ‘honour’ was the basic mental disposition on which monarchical statecraft relied. However, in contrast to Montesquieu, Abbt argued that each citizen should be to some degree a bearer of honour. National honour, as embodied by the monarch and the laws given by him, could thus become an object of the citizens’ passions. According to Abbt, this would have a moralizing impact: rather than pursuing their narrow individual and egoistic ends, citizens would be elevated to contemplating some higher objective. As a consequence, the citizen’s (*Bürger*) attachment to earthly things – and especially to one’s own life – would be elevated to a sense of honour and glory.

However, the view that military service could contribute to the elevation and moral education of the citizen was quite marginal in the debates of the eighteenth century. Attempts to construct national citizenship within the framework of the monarchical state were intrinsically contradictory. In fact, the early modern state was characterized by its attempt to neutralize religious and political ‘opinions’ from the sphere of a bureaucratically backed sovereignty and thus tended to exclude ideological struggles from the political sphere. ‘Opinions’ such as religious faiths or political convictions were thus relegated to the individual’s ‘inner moral space’. Absolutist subjects could have private opinions, and they could even share these opinions with other individuals, but they were not part of any political community because their political existence depended entirely on the state. The state, however, excluded any feeling of belonging inasmuch as it banned all opinions. This exclusion of all communitarian bonds was the reason for the transcendence
of the state. Accordingly, there was hardly a possibility for soldiers or citizens to identify with the state as Abbt advocated it.

III

This situation changed with the French Revolution. The citizen is now conceived of as a part of the sovereign and is, as such, not only endowed with the capacity of autonomous political action, but also with political ‘opinions’ in contemporary parlance. Today, we would use the term ‘ideologies’. ‘Wars of opinions’ seemed to be banned from Europe since the religious civil wars, and especially conservative political and military observers were horrified by the fact that, from 1792 onwards, these ‘barbaric’ wars of opinions reappeared on the European scene. In contrast to wars that were waged for material interests, wars of opinion were more difficult to settle by compromise, because each belligerent party was fighting for values. Wars fought for material interests were thought to be more likely to be limited, whereas wars of opinion had a tendency to unlimited escalation, precisely because they were fought in the name of values worth fighting and ultimately dying for.

However, which values precisely were involved? Many actors of the French Revolution invoked the nation. For instance, Robespierre depicted the French army as

the glory of the nation and of humanity; our virtuous warriors are shouting Vive la République when marching towards victory; falling by the enemy sword, their scream is Vive la République. Their last words are hymns to liberty; their last sighs are vows to the fatherland.

However, this quotation shows that the nation is here synonymous for a whole series of politically key concepts: liberty, republicanism and even – perhaps more surprisingly – humanity. Especially this last reference to humanity conveys a universal value that seems utterly incongruent with our modern understanding of the nation. It is interesting and puzzling that the nation from the onset carried meanings that did not really fit into the narrative of war of one nation against another. The same holds true for the concepts of liberty and republicanism, because it is not immediately clear why these should be the exclusive property of one nation rather than of another.

Even when looking at examples of nationalization of the armed forces in a more traditional sense the picture does not become any clearer. In August 1792, a couple of months after the beginning of the war, the National Assembly decided to disband units of foreign troops in France. Jacques Pierre Brissot de Warville, adversary of Robespierre and one of the apologists of the war within the Jacobin Club, presented a report to the Assembly in which he explained the reasons why foreign units should be disbanded. His main
point was that ‘free men ought to defend themselves’. In contrast to the
Frenchmen who had recently conquered their political liberty, the Swiss
units of the French army were depicted as ‘an isolated and particular force,
foreign to our principles, to our system of government’. 10 It would thus be
an error to interpret Brissot’s argument as simply nationalist. When he
claims that the Swiss are not part of the French political community, this
exclusion is not justified on ethnic, cultural or national ground in the mod-
ern sense, but premised on political reasons. Brissot explicitly invoked the
fact that the Swiss soldiers under French colours were actually not supposed
to fight external enemies, but against the revolution within France. They
were supposed to help a tyrant oppressing the French population.
This is a perfect expression of the fragility of the concept of the nation. As
historical research on nationalism has amply demonstrated, the first meaning
of the nation was political, rather than nationalist in the modern sense – it
signified ‘the people’ and more precisely the sovereign people endowed with
civil rights. Accordingly, the Swiss could be said not to belong to the nation
exactly in the same sense in which the tyrant they were supposed to defend
against the sovereign people was not a part of the nation in this understanding.
However, as Eric Hobsbawn argued in his standard account of Nations and
Nationalisms since 1780,
the very act of democratizing politics that is of turning subjects into citizens,
tends to produce a populist consciousness which, seen in some light, is hard
to distinguish from a national, even a chauvinist, patriotism – for if ‘the
country’ is in some way ‘mine’, then it is more readily seen as preferable
to those of foreigners, especially if these lack the rights and freedom of the
true citizen. 11
Brisсот’s argument is one example among others of this fragile line where
the older political understanding merges with the modern understanding of
the nation in terms of a common culture or ethnicity.

IV

However, when looking at ego-documents from soldiers of the French
Revolution it becomes clear that nationalist motivations in the modern
sense hardly play a role. Where these soldiers expressed any intrinsic moti-
vations, their rhetoric is political and they depict their fight as a fight for
liberty and republicanism rather than in national terms. Their ideological
mindset was indeed very close to the one expressed by intellectuals or politi-
cal decision-makers like Robespierre. We thus find very often references to
liberty, 12 the republic 13 and the fatherland 14 in the writings of soldiers of
the French Revolution. Especially during the first years of revolutionary war
soldiers considered themselves as fighters for liberty and human rights and
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were happy to be recognized as such by the population. Accordingly, they were unable to understand when this feeling was not shared by those they wanted to ‘liberate’. A volunteer of 1792 described this disarray in front of civilians in Germany who ‘behaved very badly, many fired on our troops; it was even said that they committed the inhumanity of throwing the sick out of the windows’. Hence, the population had to be brought to recognize the justice of revolutionary war. Another soldier wrote about ‘rendering patriotic the town by arms’ and about ‘warming up’ the population’s patriotism by threatening them with the ‘holy guillotine’ in order to ‘bring them to reason’. On the other hand, in these years few soldiers stressed national belongings, and if they mentioned their ‘Frenchness’ in the face of the enemy, their concept of nationality conveys the same ambiguities as mentioned above. The volunteer Joliclerc expressed this in the following words: ‘I like myself, but I like even more my family and I like more my fatherland than my family, and the entire word more than my fatherland. One needs always to be ready to sacrifice oneself.’ These examples demonstrate that the nation was not per se a cause worth fighting for, but only inasmuch as it conveyed either a political meaning – liberty and republicanism – or as a potentially universal entity that embraced humanity as a whole. This concept of the nation bears little resemblance to modern nationalism. However, Joliclerc added that he felt ‘French in the face of the enemy for the defence of the fatherland, which is a glorious cause that should animate the whole world’. Here, the internal tension of the revolutionary concept of the nation becomes the most visible: the universal value of the fight for liberty and human rights (‘that should animate the whole world’) is clearly associated with the cause of the French army. The French Republic, in other words, is conceived of as the concrete historical embodiment of universal human values. It is only a small step from such a conception to the ‘moral annihilation’ of the enemy: if I fight for universal values of humankind, my enemy is of necessity conceived of as the enemy of these universal human values. If I embody humanity, my enemy embodies the non-human.

The same holds true when turning to the perhaps most prominent advocate of German nationalism of the period, the philosopher Johann Gottlob Fichte. In 1793 he published a Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urtheile des Publikums über die französische Revolution (Contribution to the Correction of the Judgement of the Public on the French Revolution) which made him one of the most influential defenders of the French Revolution among the German intelligentsia, and this precisely at a time when most German intellectuals were horrified by the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793. Yet in a few years, in 1807–08, he gave a series of public lectures in Berlin, eventually published as Addresses to the German Nation, which became one of the most
influential texts of German nationalism. In these lectures, Fichte exhorts
his fellow Germans to engage in a fight against the French occupation.
Famously, Fichte conceptualized nationality in modern cultural terms, that
is, foremost as a linguistic entity. Fichte is thus one of the most interesting
sources that illustrate the shift from a revolutionary to a ‘modern national-
ism’ during the early years of the nineteenth century.

Whereas the understanding of the nation at the end of the eighteenth
century had been political and thus state-centred, Fichte conceives of the
‘nation’ as independent from political organization. Hence Fichte paved the
way for our modern understanding of nationality. Moreover, the nation is
not only independent from but even prior to the state. In Fichte, the nation
and the fatherland acquire an explicit spiritual meaning which makes them
superior to the state. The state, by contrast, is not much more than the
earthly organization of the superior spiritual ends, which are embodied in
the nation. Fichte’s philosophy of war directly derives from these premises.
War gives rise to a ‘revolutionary tension’ within the state and ‘active pat-
riotism, voluntary sacrifice, and heroic sense’ replaced the normal orderly
obedience to the law. In other words, the spiritual superiority of the nation
over the state becomes particularly visible in periods of war. When the
fatherland was in danger, the normal administrative procedures on which
the functioning of the state relied – including the rule of law – could be
suspended.

However, besides these elements that gave rise to the perception of Fichte
as one of the main intellectual protagonists of modern nationalism, his con-
cept of the nation also contains key elements that bear resemblance to ear-
lier conceptions. This concerns firstly his conception of language on which
he bases the German nation. According to Fichte, the German language is
superior to other languages because it is pure from foreign importations and
thus ‘alive’. And this means that, in the German language, each speech act
represents spontaneously the totality of the historical and spiritual life of
the nation. As a consequence, the ‘spiritual culture’ is in direct contact with
the nation’s life. The nation’s life is a common good for everybody, which
means that there can never be an absolute division between the different
classes of the nation in Germany. The cultural and linguistic foundation of
modern nationalism in Fichte thus also conveys an explicit social meaning,
and both are indeed inseparably linked. According to Fichte, the spiritual
superiority of German culture and language derived from the possibility of
the equal political participation that it implied. At this point it becomes
clear that even Fichte’s cultural and language-based understanding of the
nation is in continuity with more political accounts of the nation, such as in
Abbé Sieyès’ 1789 revolutionary pamphlet *What is the Third Estate?* In Sieyès,
the nation was directly assimilated to the third estate and thus to the pro-
ductive part of the population, in contrast to the socially and economically
useless second estate. In other words, Sieyès described the nation as *demos.*
In his 1813 lectures at Berlin University Über den Begriff des wahrhaftigen Krieges (On the Concept of True War), Fichte made a similar point. Selfishness and private property were the distinctive features of the bygone period of absolutism (which he termed 'Zeitalter der vollendeten Sündhaftigkeit' – the 'age of absolute sinfulness'). Consequently, the state was an 'institution of property-owners' ('Anstalt der Eigenthümer') and soldiers were mere mercenaries, fighting for money. This alienation was to cease in 1813. National war, in Fichte's understanding, also meant to supersede the class boundaries between property owners and the 'lower people'. In other words, even in Fichte's spiritual and cultural construction of the nation, the social dimension was present and the motivation for fighting and for sacrifice was not wholly nationalist in the modern sense but also had a political and even a social dimension. Rather than a break with the ideas brought forward during the French Revolution, Fichte's culturally founded nationalism is in direct continuity with French revolutionary concepts of the nation.

VI

The last example is drawn from more ambiguous source material, that is ego-documents by German soldiers fighting under Napoleon's colours. Over a third of the soldiers in Napoleon's Russian campaign were not French nationals in the modern sense, but either conscripts from territories that had been annexed to the French Empire, or from contingents that Napoleon's allies had to deliver to the Emperor's war effort. A number of these soldiers wrote memoirs after the events. Many of those were published in the course of the nineteenth century. Their experience is interesting because these men were fighting, in the era of awakening nationalism, for a foreign army and a foreign nation. The general finding concerning these ego-documents is that their own national belonging did not play a large role for these men. Despite the fact that German nationalism historically constituted itself primarily in opposition to the French, the Franco-German antagonism was hardly ever a theme in itself. Rather, there was an oscillation between the first and the third person. Jakob Klaus, barber in his civil life and son of a day-labourer from Hassloch in South West Germany who was conscripted in 1807 into Napoleon's army, thus wrote in the same paragraph of 'the French' and of 'us French'. For the most part, however, the narratives focused on the antagonism between the warring parties, that is Napoleon's army against their enemies, and clearly not on national boundaries. The latter only appeared in the framework of rivalries between different units within Napoleon's army, for instance contingents of the Rhine Federation versus native French units. Cultural or even linguistic problems do not seem to have played a role even in these cases. What played an important role, however, was a traditional military virtue: loyalty to a particular unit and its commander, including the supreme commander Napoleon.
consideration directly led to the political evaluation of the fight and it is
very striking to see that Germans under French colours adopted on several
occasions the language of French political ideology. An officer thus depicted
the war in Spain as a fight for a European league of nations and perpetual
peace,33 and an elementary school teacher from the Rhineland admits to
having had troubles getting used to the ‘new political conditions’ after
Waterloo: ‘More than I had thought, my heart was attached, not to France,
but to the Emperor […] Most of the old war comrades, with whom I was in
close contact, had the same feeling.’34

It clearly results from these writings that the persona of ‘the Emperor’ is the
product of Napoleonic ideology, that is, the personification of the results of
the French Revolution. ‘Napoleon’, to put it bluntly, stands for popular sov-
ereignty, rule of law and European enlightenment. The obvious conclusion is
even more puzzling. The previous examples highlighted a tension between, on
the one hand, the political meaning of the nation, which was in many cases
even conceived of in terms of universal values, and, on the other, a reference to
a particular ‘nation’ with its particular language, culture and history. Examples
drawn from the French Revolution and early nineteenth-century German
nationalism tended towards the association of the cause of the particular
nation with the universal cause of humankind. Universality, so to speak, was
‘nationalized’. Ego-documents by ‘foreign’ soldiers under Napoleon suggest
that the language of universal inclusiveness that characterized Napoleonic
ideology also worked, at least to some extent, outside national boundaries.
Even Germans drafted into the French army could thus adhere to the ideology
of universal inclusion. At the same time, however, they were also aware of the
exclusionary aspects of this inclusiveness.

VII

The conclusion derived from these examples is unambiguous: the nation
in its modern understanding played but a minor role in the justification of
and the motivation in war during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth
centuries. Cultural and even linguistic differences, let alone ethnicity, were
not a major concern for contemporary actors, be they political decision-
makers, public intellectuals or soldiers. Within the military, traditional
virtues like loyalty to specific units and their commanders were still of major
importance. However, something new was progressively being added to
these traditional virtues: a political meaning of the fight. As a consequence,
the conceptual novelty, that is the language of the nation, remains primarily
political in scope. The nation, in other words, stands for political or social issues
rather than for culture or ethnicity. The nation in its modern understanding
was no motivation for fight and sacrifice.

What do these findings teach us with regard to the ‘post-heroic’ concept
of war, for which Luttwak famously argued?35 The answer is twofold. On the
one hand, there is substantial historical evidence that contemporary actors in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were indeed aware of witnessing a major shift in military affairs away from what the modernizers during the period called ‘cabinet wars’ of limited goals. New strategic and tactical concepts emerged, among them those of decisive action, rapid concentration of forces, ‘enthusiastic’ heroism and so on. However, these changes did not go unquestioned. When discussing Jomini and Clausewitz today, we are in fact discussing different strands of modernizing military thought. Both strategists expressed different versions of what Luttwak called ‘Napoleonic’ warfare. However, the debates during that period had already raised some of Luttwak’s objections towards ‘Napoleonic’ warfare and its ‘heroic’ implications. This implied, most importantly, the question of casualties. French strategist Jacques Antoine Hippolye Count of Guibert thus deplored in his 1772 *Essai general de tactique* (*A General Essay on Tactics*) that a ‘non-heroic’ approach to military affairs, that is, an approach that put too much emphasis on casualty avoidance, had disastrous political consequences.\(^3\) However, late eighteenth-century critics of modern mass warfare hinted at yet another issue other than casualties. And this leads us to the second lesson to be drawn from these historical considerations. As pointed out above, the nation as it appeared in the political language of the revolutionary period had primarily a political signification. It covered a semantic field that reached from popular sovereignty to democracy via republicanism. This is arguably one of the blind spots of Luttwak’s argument. Heroic warfare, as invented during the revolutionary wars, included an attachment of the citizen to the fundamental values of a polity, whereas the ‘pre-heroic’ warriors of the eighteenth century were criticized precisely for lacking these values. According to Guibert, it is [the weakness of our governments] which, not being able to compose our armies of citizens, men who have a zeal for the service, or soldiers, not merely for the sake of gain, occasions them to be so numerous and burthensome. It is that which, not knowing how to make honour their reward, pays them with money alone.\(^3\)

Without martial virtues being disseminated throughout the population, military apparatuses would become mere mechanical tools in the hands of governments, and societies would abandon the sovereign right of the decision whether to go to war to mere technical considerations. War, in other words, would become undemocratic. This was the crucial point of the Enlightenment debates about national armies and martial virtues. ‘Heroic’ concepts of war – while giving way to the most deplorable excesses of militarism and nationalism – were also a means to gain democratic sovereignty over the question of war and peace. Heroism gave an answer to the core question of the political values for which a war is worth being fought. And today’s debates about post-heroic warfare should certainly not overlook this crucial achievement of heroism.
30 Thomas Hippler

Notes

1. Most of the following examples are from Thomas Hippler, *Citizens, Soldiers and National Armies: Military Service in France and Germany* (London: Routledge, 2008).


26. Rogers Brubaker’s influential *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) systematically overlooks these continuities, postulating a categorical difference between French and German understandings of the nation.


32. Thomas Hippler


34. Röhrig, *Unter der Fahne des ersten Napoleon*, p. 171.

