

Once a Soldier-Citizen, Always a Citizen-Soldier: French War Veterans and Notions of Rights and Duties

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Introduction

The *Handbook of International Human Rights Terminology* determines that “To every human right there is an express or implicit correlative human duty owed.”¹ This chapter considers the issue of rights and duties as interpreted by one particular group of social actors: French war veterans. Having risked their lives for France and fulfilled what republican doctrine outlined as their civic duty, veterans often position themselves as morally superior and more devoted to the nation than other citizens – a situation which endows them with certain rights and privileges, as well as certain duties. On a material level, veterans expect their erstwhile physical and spiritual devotion to the state to manifest in unique privileges and rewards. On a more esoteric level, veterans interpret their activities as both entitling and obliging them to comment on post-war life. The primary means through which veterans introduce legitimacy and potency to their arguments for their rights and duties is through reference to warfare and especially the war dead, with participation in protests and especially commemorative events also playing a part.

This chapter analyses veterans’ understanding of their rights and duties through reference to the notion of the soldier-citizen. This concept originated with the large-scale participation of volunteers in defence of the French Republic following the 1789 Revolution, and was enshrined over time as central to French war narratives. The soldier-citizens of the First World War carried certain values with them into battle; following the war, men who joined veterans’ associations (and who, in doing so, chose to formally identify as “veterans”) committed to upholding principles deemed central to the veteran identity including certain rights and duties and many of the same values for which the

1 H. Victor Condé, *A Handbook of International Human Rights Terminology* (United States of America: University of Nebraska Press, 2004 [1999]), 73.

war was supposedly fought. These men thus morphed from soldier-citizens to citizen-soldiers dedicated to continuing a crusade beyond the battlefield.

The sources for this chapter are articles published in five key veteran newspapers over a period of ninety years. The horizontal and vertical nature of the research approach serves to demonstrate that French veteran discourse of rights and duties is unerringly similar across the spectrum of veterans' associations, and has remained constant over the decades despite its espousal by veterans of different conflicts and "generations of fire." As such, the conclusions drawn in this paper highlight feelings which might be deemed integral to the veteran experience and "mentality."

Soldier-Citizens and Citizen-Soldiers

Soldiering underwent significant change following the French Revolution. Whereas under the monarchic *Ancien Régime* soldiers were isolated from the political motivations for war, the revolutionary wars of 1792-1802 provided soldiers with a cause: the defence of the Republic (the nation) and its ideals.² Further, these wars were fought in large part not by professional soldiers but by volunteer "soldier-citizens," most of whom hailed from the patriotic and educated bourgeoisie and fervently believed in the Revolution's libertarian ideals.³ With the introduction of both greater diversity and greater numbers of men to soldiering, the public began to reassess traditionally negative perceptions of the profession.⁴ This change was reinforced by state propaganda which celebrated military volunteers as loyal and dedicated to republican ideology.⁵ Soldiering eventually came to be viewed as both a personal challenge and a

2 Omer Bartov, "'The Nation in Arms': Germany and France, 1789-1939," *History Today* 44, 9 (1994), 28; John Horne, "Corps, Lieux et Nation: La France et L'invasion de 1914," *Annales* 55, 1 (2000), 73.

3 George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 16.

4 Isser Woloch, "'A Sacred Debt': Veterans and the State in Revolutionary and Napoleonic France," in *Disabled Veterans in History*, ed. David A. Gerber (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), 157.

5 Festivals provided an especially powerful means of promoting these ideals. The 1790 Fête de la Fédération set the precedent of heavily incorporating soldiers into festival programmes, with the recently-formed National Guard swearing allegiance to the new regime and parading around the Champ de Mars. Richard Cobb and Colin Jones, eds., *The French Revolution: Voices from a Momentous Epoch 1789-1795* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 107.