

Motivation in War: The Experience of Common Soldiers in Old-Regime Europe

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A view prevails amongst military historians that the soldiers raised and trained on behalf of the monarchs of old-regime Europe compare unfavourably with those who fought for the French Republic. The soldiers who made up the armies of Republican France are said to be enthusiastic combatants committed to a revolutionary ideology while the typical old-regime soldier, by contrast, is thought to be apolitical and motivated primarily by fear of the brutal disciplinary system which was wielded over him. Although the notion of the willing and highly-motivated French revolutionary soldier, has been interrogated and somewhat revised by the likes of Alan Forrest (1), the 'negative' portrayal of the men who served in the armies of 18th-century European monarchies continues to hold sway. In *Motivation in War*, Ilya Berkovich disputes the claim that old-regime common soldiers were brutalized automatons and he sets out to re-evaluate and significantly downgrade the importance of coercion within the 'motivational system' which led ordinary men to enlist, to serve, and to fight. For Berkovich, old-regime common soldiers should be viewed primarily as willing participants who saw themselves as engaged in a distinct and honourable activity.

In order to reconstruct the inner-life and motivations of the 18th-century common soldier Berkovich has amassed a truly impressive source base of 250 'ego-documents' (letters, journals, and memoirs) written by privates and non-commissioned officers. It is worth highlighting from the outset the ambition of Berkovich's project, which has a broad chronological sweep, and touches on all the major European armies of the 18th century, excepting those of Sweden and Spain. Although a number of the autobiographical accounts listed in the bibliography have been previously published, a substantial proportion have been unearthed through careful archival detective-work in London, Vincennes, and Frankfurt. Berkovich has done a great service to the military history specialist by bringing these diffuse sources together. Moreover, their very existence serves to illustrate one of the major interventions made by the book. Contrary to the common perception of old-regime soldiers as illiterate and disengaged, a number of 18th-century rankers did write about their experiences, and Berkovich rightly argues that the marks which these men left on the historical record demand to be closely scrutinised.

Informed by 20th-century psychological and sociological studies of combat effectiveness among British and

American troops, Berkovich posits three key categories of motivation which drove men to enlist, to remain true to their colours, and to fight. The three primary 'levers' of motivation are identified as 'coercive', 'remunerative', and 'normative' incentives. Within this dynamic, it has traditionally been 'coercive incentives' which have been prioritized as the key motivating factor within old-regime armies. Some of the details from Berkovich's own study illustrate why this belief has taken root. We learn, for example, that the armies of Russia and Prussia were reliant upon conscription to fill the ranks (p. 36). We hear that convicted deserters from the armies of Louis XV were faced by the dreadful prospect of either the firing squad or disfigurement and perpetual service as a galley slave in the Mediterranean Fleet (pp. 69–70). And we find that Austrian military regulations granted commanding officers the power to summarily execute any of their own men who turned to flee from the battlefield (p. 99). To modern eyes, the severity of 18th-century military justice and discipline immediately suggests a broad-based system of coercion.

However, Berkovich cautions us to consider the wide gulf between 18th-century army regulations and the lived experiences of soldiers on the ground. Taking up the case of desertion in chapter two, Berkovich finds that most deserters escaped scot-free from punishment simply because they were never recaptured. Similarly, of the minority of runaways who were picked up by their regiments, many could reasonably expect to avoid the death penalty. Old-regime states lacked the 'effective control mechanisms' necessary to stem the ebb and flow of desertion while military courts weighed the merits of each case before proceeding to sentencing. Hence the seemingly brutal codes upon which 18th-century military justice rested were never enforced to their fullest extent and desertion remained, throughout the period, a 'viable option' for disgruntled common soldiers. Given this state of affairs, Berkovich argues that we must question the 'singular importance attributed to coercive compliance in the running of eighteenth-century armies' (p. 93).

In chapter three, Berkovich takes his case further, by examining the day-to-day experience of military discipline. The conventional view is that old-regime soldiers were effectively beaten into shape by their overbearing superiors. By examining the life writings of soldiers, however, Berkovich suggests that power relations within old-regime armies were not as one-sided as is often believed to be the case. For one thing, common soldiers commented that physical punishments could be entirely avoided by 'good' soldiers who had effectively socialised into the army. Furthermore, the limited application of corporal punishment was 'not necessarily considered brutal and unjust' and was, according to Berkovich, viewed as legitimate by many 18th-century rankers (p. 111). What is more, common soldiers had the ability to navigate their way through the system of military discipline. They took advantage of officers turning a blind eye to minor infractions, such as absenteeism, and gamed the system to illicit pardons and leniency from military courts. Far from a one-sided contest, Berkovich finds that commanding officers were engaged in constant a 'tug-of-war' with their men. Indeed, common soldiers are shown to have been highly assertive, presenting petitions and threatening to mutiny, when conditions of service became intolerable. At the same time, officers confronted by such tactics were frequently forced to address the concerns of their men. Berkovich thus makes the case that obedience under 18th-century military discipline was more a product of compromise than coercion.

Having revised down the importance of 'coercive compliance' within the balance of soldierly motivation, chapter four of *Motivation in War* moves on to consider the factors which drove men to enlist in the army in the first place. Although Berkovich is willing to accept that 'remunerative incentives' may have had some bearing on the enlistment of poor young men, he is inclined to downplay the overall importance of economic considerations on the grounds that a soldier's bounty money was quickly spent, and his pay and subsistence was usually only just enough to provide for his basic needs (p. 163). Moreover, through an analysis of French and British recruitment posters, Berkovich shows that the tropes of 'gallantry and patriotism' appear much more frequently than the 'meagre' financial incentives offered to new enlistees (pp. 138, 164). Berkovich identifies a similar trend within the recollections of common soldiers. Most new recruits enlisted for a tangle of reasons. However, the common thread suggested here is not economic survival but 'personal passion'. According to Berkovich's analysis, old-regime common soldiers were drawn to the army due to their yearning for some aspect of military service. The desire for adventure, for a test of character, or a pre-existing connection with the army as an institution were especially important factors. Thus the men who

entered the army are seen as being a 'self-selecting' group, whose 'vocational predisposition' (p. 152), rather than their economic plight, led them to join the military.

Once enlisted, Berkovich argues that a form of 'normative compliance' continued to operate on common soldiers, and helps to explain why 18th-century armies were rarely crippled by mass desertion or by rank-and-file rebellion. In chapter five, we learn that soldiers quickly adopted a lifestyle and appearance that was distinct from that of civilians and that soldiers were socialised into a military 'counter-culture' which emphasized the importance of 'honour' above all else. 'Honour' is defined here as a form of mutual respect earned through acts of manliness, bravery, or open-handedness (p. 175). Using personal recollections, Berkovich argues that private soldiers wished to be perceived as honourable by their peers and that shaming tactics were used by both officers and men to uphold soldierly codes of behaviour. There were practical advantages to this state of affairs. By including 'generosity' within the agreed definition of honourable conduct, soldiers ensured that resources were more freely shared between comrades and, perhaps more importantly, that patronage was handed down by officers (pp. 177–9, 208). A shared vocabulary of military slang and a well-defined code of conduct also helped to foster an *esprit de corps* while this sense of belonging in turn allowed old-regime soldiers to find a degree of 'contentedness' with their life in the army (p. 194). Hence Berkovich suggests that it was the all-enveloping code of honour which kept private soldiers true to their colours, rather than economic incentives or the violence of the army's disciplinary regime.

In his final substantive chapter, Berkovich completes the life-cycle of the recruit by considering the motives of common soldiers on active service. Far from passive or indifferent creatures, Berkovich makes the case that some 'soldiers had a very clear sense that fighting was done for a reason' (p. 198). In part, this was because military authorities kept their men updated on the progress of a conflict through reading aloud official dispatches and religious sermons and by including the rank-and-file in periodic victory celebrations. Furthermore, Berkovich argues that some of the men relished the arrival of news from an ongoing campaign and looked forward to measuring themselves in combat against their traditional enemies. Here, religious or national prejudices were important motivators. We learn, for example, that ordinary soldiers from the armies of Austria and Prussia wrote disparagingly about rival Russian troops, that French soldiers were roundly condemned as 'foppish and haughty' by soldier-authors seemingly from every other European army, and that guerrilla fighters, such as the American rebels, were despised for their adoption of 'unfair' and 'barbaric' tactics (pp. 200–6).

In addition to hatred of the enemy, *Motivation in War* emphasizes that 'networks of loyalty', forged between comrades-in-arms and between private soldiers and their officers, provided an equally powerful reason to fight with honour. Berkovich rejects the commonly-held notion that commanding officers viewed their men simply as 'commodities' and instead argues for the officer-soldier relationship to be conceived in reciprocal terms. Courageous officers who led from the front, generous officers who put their hand in their pocket for their men, and humane officers who looked out for the welfare of their troops, were all praised and respected by old-regime soldier-authors. Berkovich accepts that in the age of 'proprietary command', there was an element of self-interest in such paternalistic gestures. However, he argues that this did not preclude a genuine sense of attachment from forming between officers and men. This attachment, in turn, bolstered the moral authority of commanders when leading their troops into battle. Although Berkovich seems to be unaware of the parallels, it is worth noting that his conception of officer-soldier relationship, is strikingly similar to that offered recently by J. E. Cookson.[\(2\)](#)

At the same time as these vertical bonds were at play, Berkovich also finds evidence of strong horizontal links between private soldiers. Particularly interesting is his suggestion that the 'mess', in which a small group of soldiers (and often their wives) pooled resources and cooked meals together, may have functioned as a vehicle for 'primary group cohesion'. Outside of the mess, a shared sense of nation, region, or even educational status is found to have bound common soldiers to one another. From the life writings investigated here, Berkovich finds ample evidence of soldiers loyally sticking by their comrades and their officers through the stress of battle or during periods of internment. Comradery, in combination with codes of honour, is therefore seen as a particularly potent motivational factor.

In the conclusion to *Motivation in War*, a case is made for an essential continuity in the experiences and motivations of soldiers serving in 'old-regime, revolutionary and, subsequently, Napoleonic armies' (p. 230). This argument has some merit, and is built up consistently throughout. However, in making his case Berkovich tends to overlook some obvious discontinuities between old-regime armies and post-revolutionary forces. For example, although the 'leniency' of military justice in old-regime Europe is emphasized in chapter three, there is no comparison made between these systems and the potentially milder conditions to be found operating within George Washington's Continental Army. There is also no acknowledgement that common soldiers in 18th-century armies generally had very limited opportunities for promotion above the rank of NCO when compared to the much more meritocratic processes to be found in the armies of Republican France. Moreover, this reviewer cannot shake the sense that there must be some difference between fighting for 'King and Country' and fighting, as a citizen, for the nation and for revolutionary ideals. The National Convention ensured that the soldiers of the Republic were inundated in propaganda and schooled in a 'program of political education' while the governors of old-regime Europe hoped that their troops could be kept ignorant of party politics and especially of republicanism.⁽³⁾ Surely these political contexts made some difference to 'motivational systems' at play within different armies? Berkovich cannot be entirely unaware of these distinctions and his unwillingness to grapple with them is slightly puzzling. Highlighting and weighing the importance of some key differences between old-regime and revolutionary soldiering in his conclusion would by no means have unravelled his overall argument about the essential commonality between the two and could, in fact, have broadened the appeal of his study.

A second difficulty arises from Berkovich's deployment of source material. In the introduction the potentialities of autobiographical material are clearly set out. However, in the course of the book we hear very little about the pitfalls and complexities of these sources. For example, Berkovich is inclined to read-off without comment the occasionally fanciful-sounding statements made by Jean Antoine Rossignol who claims, among other things, to have survived ten(!) duels and a violent confrontation with his Sergeant Major (pp. 104, 119–20). Of much greater concern than the validity of his sources, is the context in which they were produced. Berkovich does not always discuss when his sources were published and how and by whom they were intended to be consumed. This omission is compounded by a decision by the publisher to truncate all footnotes so that it is often impossible to find the date of a source under discussion without turning to the bibliography. Having turned to the back of the book, the reader finds that many of Berkovich's sources were published in the mid-19th century. Yet we learn little about why a spate of 18th-century soldier-narratives were published in that period. A further practical problem (at least for the linguistically-challenged reader) is that some of Berkovich's quotations are not translated into English. Although this is a minor complaint, it may deter the undergraduate or the non-specialist from reading further, as indeed might Berkovich's adoption of jargon, such as 'normative compliance in the initial stage' (p. 157).

None of these gripes should, however, detract from the fact that this is an impressive first monograph from an extremely adept and promising military historian. Berkovich's argument is thoughtful, compelling, and bold. His scepticism about the influence of economic forces upon enlistment and his revisionism regarding the significance of coercion as a motivational tool will certainly raise eyebrows and will probably inspire renewed debate among military historians. Moreover, by drawing together an array of understudied materials from across a wide geographical area, *Motivation in War* prompts the military historian to seek-out further writings from soldier-authors and highlights the need for greater comparative study, particularly of military

and civilian justice. Berkovich also deserves to receive a readership from outside of the enclave of military history, for his work has much to say about government by consent and the limits of state power within 18th-century European societies.

Notes

1. Alan Forrest, *Conscripts and Deserters: The Army and French Society during the Revolution and Empire* (Oxford, 1989).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. John E. Cookson, 'Regimental worlds: interpreting the experience of British soldiers during the Napoleonic Wars', in *Soldiers, Citizens and Civilians: Experiences and Perceptions of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, 1790–1820*, ed. Alan Forrest, Karen Hagemann, and Jane Rendall (Basingstoke, 2009), pp. 23–42.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. John A. Lynn, *Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791–4* (Chicago, IL, 1984), pp. 124, 137–8, 160.[Back to \(3\)](#)

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