

Spring 4-24-2013

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Recommended Citation

Scupham, William, "An Army for the Revolution, a Revolution for the Army: The French Revolutionary Army, 1792-1797" (2013).
Symposium on Undergraduate Research and Creative Expression (SOURCE). 212.
<https://scholar.valpo.edu/cus/212>

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An Army for the Revolution, a Revolution for the Army: The French Revolutionary Army, 1792-1797

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There is a common myth about the average French soldier at the time of the French Revolution that presents him as a reckless, heroic citizen-soldier, swept to victory by the power of revolutionary fervor. This myth obscures some important realities of French military life. The French military was often characterized not by fantastic victories, but rather by an early incompetence. Indeed, this inability threatened to destroy France on many occasions. This essay attempts to reconcile the myth and reality by exploring what motivated common Frenchmen to fight and win wars. Demographic, political, tactical, and organizational analysis of the French Revolutionary Army reveals how the military was a transitional organization caught between the monarchic model and the nascent democratic ideology. The military saw a growth in its wider “Frenchness” as men from all of France volunteered. Many of the operations of the army were carried out with the French conception of democracy and national identity in mind. At the same time, the older influences anchored the army, enabling the revolutionary spirit to survive. One finds an army struggling to reconcile its old monarchical roots in organization, equipment, manpower, and even battlefield tactics with the new revolutionary French identity.

Information about the Author:

William Scupham is a junior history and political science double major with a penchant for military history. He is currently involved in any number of historical pursuits. He hopes to continue exploring the realities of war and how they impact personal lives and society at large. This paper is to be published in *Primary Source*, an undergraduate journal printed by Indiana University.

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Colleen Seguin

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