
H-France Review Vol. 3 (November 2003), No. 132

Clive Emsley, *Gendarmes and the State in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. xii + 288 pp. Tables, notes, and index. \$90.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 0-19-820798-0.

Review by Scott Haine, University of Maryland University College.

Professor Emsley has been a pioneer in the study of the French gendarmerie for over twenty years. At the March 2000 colloquium on “Gendarmerie, State, and Society in the Nineteenth Century,” sponsored by the Center for Research in History at the Universités de Paris I and IV, it was natural--nay, obligatory--that Clive Emsley not only presented a paper but was also president of one of the sessions.[1] In his current book, *Gendarmes and the State in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Emsley presents both a magisterial overview of the rise of the gendarmerie in France and a ground-breaking study of how this institution spread to the rest of Europe. In essence, the book anticipated much of the ground covered in the recent colloquium, for Emsley has been one of the first scholars to do extensive archival research on the gendarmerie across Europe.

This study is a superb synthesis of research and analysis. The introduction tackles the central question: what made this hybrid force, straddling the military and civilian traditions of law enforcement, so attractive? His response is that the gendarmerie, first in France and then across continental Europe, proved a potent force in bringing rural Europe under the control of the modern nation-state. By the second half of the century the French model had a competitor, especially admired by Napoleon III, in the police system put in place by the Metropolitan Police of London (1829). By the end of the century, when rural areas across Europe came increasingly under state control, the English model became even more prominent, although gendarmes were still used to blunt the rising working class unrest.[2]

On the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution, gendarmes from France to Russia became the most visible symbol of the nation-state outside of urban areas. Emsley is attentive to the symbolic, corporeal, and cultural ramifications of the presence of these gendarmes. Wherever appropriate he incorporates the theories of Max Weber, Norbert Elias, and Michel Foucault on questions such as changing notions of the body, images of authority, and the institutional culture (camaraderie) of gendarmes.

The book is divided into three parts: (1) “France: The Coming of the Gendarmes,” (2) “France: Consolidation,” and (3) “Europe: Spreading the Model.” Emsley’s Thompsonian language conveys an institution and its mutation and motion across a centralizing Europe. The first chapter provides a thorough overview of the gendarmerie’s royal predecessor, the *maréchaussée*. Here, Emsley blends his own primary research, on incidence of infractions and the force’s social origins, with an abundant secondary literature. (He notes that the *maréchaussée* is better covered in historiography than its nineteenth-century successor.) Following the work of Claude C. Sturgill, Emsley places his emphasis not on Louis XIV but on Minister of War Claude Le Blanc, who implemented vital reforms after the Sun King’s death. Under Le Blanc’s tenure the *maréchaussée* became the most effective rural police force

in Europe. Venality was curbed, the amount and quality of written records improved, and pay was augmented. Nevertheless, this rural constabulary remained “thin on the ground” and by necessity acted with moderation during the outbreak of the Revolution. Despite this superb overview, the author does not deal with an intriguing question: why did the sovereigns of Enlightenment Europe not imitate this system at a time when things French were so wildly popular? In particular, why not the Spanish Bourbon kings?

In his treatment of the Revolution, Emsley develops a fruitful paradox. On the one hand, the revolutionary wars retarded the development of the gendarmerie within France; on the other hand, the French army’s success spread the institution across Europe. After the *maréchaussée* had disintegrated with the monarchy in the early 1790s, the Directory reorganized and renamed the force “gendarmerie” under a 1798 law. Under Napoleon, however, rural policing was not only consolidated in France but was also spread throughout his empire. The corps, operating under the meritocratic revolutionary and Napoleonic principle of careers open to talents, was especially effective in repressing brigandage and in curbing the evasion of conscription while remaining, as under the old regime, a means by which retired soldiers could return to the localities of their birth. One reason the rebellious Vendée proved so hard to contain was that so few former soldiers, hence potential gendarmes, came from this region. While the emperor’s enemies outside France resented this force, its efficiency was inescapably noteworthy. Indeed, despite Napoleon’s playing one police agency off against the other and calling up gendarmes for his cavalry at the end of his empire, the size of this rural force had jumped 400 percent. Improved rural policing was one of the real achievements of the Napoleonic era.

The Restoration, finding Napoleon’s gendarmerie too useful to abolish, did effect a purge, but even so the force remained composed largely of Napoleonic veterans. Although the restored monarchy ended Napoleon’s divided-and-rule strategy, jurisdictional conflicts with local police forces (the *gardes champêtres*) nevertheless continued. (A fuller elaboration on the relationship between gendarmes and *gardes champêtres* across the century would have been helpful here and in other parts of the book.) The gendarmerie, having cut down on brigandage and deserters, then turned its attention to the problems of order surrounding traditional village festivals. This hybrid force of soldier-policemen also turned their attention to an emergent fear: the urban working classes.

In 1830, the new July monarchy again purged the gendarmerie. Despite a high level of concern for politics during the revolutions that began and finished the regime, the nascent working class was not subject to overt political repression by the gendarmerie during the reign of the citizen king. Emsley’s treatment of the surveillance and regulation of cafes and popular culture is especially perceptive. He discerns in rural areas and in small towns a growing sense of respectability that increasingly frowned upon the drunken brawls at cafes and during fairs. Nevertheless, a residual village solidarity was still evident and usually took the form of turning on the police when they intervened in faction fighting during festivals and charivaris. At times of natural disasters, however, the assistance of gendarmes was heartily welcomed.

Emsley’s final chapter in this section covers the period from 1848 to 1914 and the evolution of the gendarmerie. He reveals that despite the 1848 Revolution and the reorganization of the gendarmerie under Napoleon III during the 1850s, the gendarmerie had by then reached organizational maturity. In spite of bureaucratic infighting reminiscent of his uncle’s forces, the imperial and later republican gendarmerie gained effective mastery of the countryside and could much more effectively impose a “continual and repressive surveillance” (p. 125). With the countryside largely secured, after 1854 both the imperial and republican governments used the gendarmerie against demonstrations and strikes by the growing urban proletariat. The 1890s represent a watershed: for the first time the number of crimes and infractions in urban areas surpassed those in rural sites. Emsley concludes that the gendarmerie, in terms of public order, had integrated rural France into the nation.

In the second section, entitled "Spreading the Model," Emsley traces the way other nations borrowed and transformed the French model during the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, his main point, a suitably ironic one, is that a force forged during revolution and administrative innovation (i.e., the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods) helped to prop up aristocratic regimes and repress revolutions throughout that century.

In the conquered countries, most of the first recruits into the foreign branches of the gendarmerie were French. The areas Napoleon held the longest were those in which a camaraderie developed that roughly paralleled the esprit de corps found in France. These recent troops found that the war and occupation had spawned, as in France, new opportunities for brigandage and draft-dodging. With the advent of Napoleon's Continental System, the number of smugglers swelled. Surprisingly, the black market in British goods was more active in Italy than in Belgium or Holland, perhaps reflecting the high degree of lawlessness in southern Italy compared to the rest of Western Europe. In general, the peripheral regions of the empire, including Spain, southern Italy, and Eastern Europe, were less rigorously policed than the central areas.

After Napoleon's fall, overt rejection of his imperium hid the deeper continuities and influences, especially in Italy and Germany. The gendarmerie (the carabinieri) in the kingdom of Piedmont closely followed Napoleon's model and became the template for the nation after unification in 1870. The carabinieri played a more decisive and successful role in nation-building here than elsewhere. The efficiency of the Italian corps quickly rivaled that of France and, similarly, assisted regions suffering from natural disasters and intervened in urban areas during working-class strikes and demonstrations.

The same north/south dynamic seen in the Italian case also operated in the regions that became Germany. The French model had become especially well implanted along the Rhine, much less so in Bavaria. Unlike those in France or Italy, the gendarmes in German lands were not stationed in barracks but lived at home. (Emsley does not fully elaborate on the significance of the living accommodations of the various gendarmeries—whether at home or in barracks built at public expense or constructed by aristocrats.) As in Italy and France, the gendarmes not only arrested beggars but actively helped to consolidate the nation.

Further east, in the Hapsburg lands, even the arch-reactionary Metternich (Napoleon's resolute foe) considered expanding the gendarmerie. But only in the wake of the 1848 Revolution did the then young emperor Franz Joseph organize the Austrian gendarmes along military lines and authorize them to monitor closely any political or national dissent. Their prestige was high in the wake of the collapse of the revolutionary tide in 1849. The head of the Hapsburg gendarmerie succeeded in creating a unique institutional and sartorial identity for his force, and Emsley believes this force was as effective as one could expect in the last decades of that crumbling multi-ethnic empire.

The second-to-last chapter, "Variations Elsewhere," explores variations in both small and outlying European states. The Belgian and Dutch states had their own forces and used them in ways similar to those listed above (especially, during the second half of the century, against the rising working class). In Scandinavia, however, only Denmark developed a gendarmerie and then only after the late 1830s, abolishing it in 1894 as part of a grand political compromise with the Left. Emsley's fascinating foray into Scandinavia's *Sonderweg* in terms of rural policing whetted my appetite for a fuller explanation. Here is yet another direction of research revealed by this fruitful study.

Both Spain and Russia, at opposite ends of Europe's borders, were latecomers in developing a gendarmerie. In Russia the intent was to make absolutism more efficient, especially in regards to rooting out political dissent. Begun in 1811, the Russian corps came strongly into its own after the Decembrist revolt of 1825. Most recruits, as in other countries, came from the army and were expected to have impeccable conduct and bearing so that they could be effective at maintaining order in public

places and during fairs and holidays. But the Russians also tried to draw members of the elite into their gendarmerie's upper echelons, and the force was more directly connected to the political police than in other nations. The creator of this secondary role for the Russian force was Count Alexander Benckendorff, who had served in the Russian embassy in Paris, where he admired Fouché's work for Napoleon. But the size of the Russian force, only around 4,500, limited its effect in that vast empire.

The last European nation to develop a gendarmerie was Spain, a surprising position given the situation of fellow Bourbons sitting on the throne during the eighteenth century. The Army Law of 1878 finally brought order out of a maze of contradictory decrees and organizations by placing the gendarmerie in the hands of the military. As in France, the Spanish gendarmerie remained loyal to the monarchy, served to centralize rather than unify a long-standing state, and was used extensively against the working class at the end of the century. However, the Spanish force was heavily involved in politics and linked intimately to the upper classes. For example, landowners built barracks on their own land and thus had little contact with local populations. Moreover, the Spanish force was much more militarily oriented than other gendarmeries and was far less influenced by the British model.

By the early twentieth century, broad similarities had emerged in Europe's rural police forces. Emsley outlines a spectrum: from the civilian model most evident in Ireland to the military model most prominent in Spain and Italy. As Europe's rural areas became pacified, the English model of civil policing was ascendant. Only when used against working-class agitation did these forces exercise their full functions.

Emsley's conclusion, "The Man Praising Order," is one of his strongest chapters. He provides a superb framework for his book and for future studies. Gendarmes participated in bringing new forms of conflict resolution to rural areas, and as a result both elite and popular forms of social control declined. Future research on the gendarmerie will be most fruitful when it follows Emsley's lead and probes further into trans-acculturation. Such a study would involve examining the psychology and behavior not only of civilians but also of the police forces themselves and the iconography that surrounds law enforcement. Emsley remains at the forefront of this field as is evident from the volume on social control he has recently helped edit. [3]

Finally, Emsley's concrete delineation of the spread of the modern gendarmerie, born during the 1789 Revolution and extended across Europe in the following century, should inspire other historians to undertake studies of similar institutions. For example, the institutions that Isser Woloch covers in *The New Regime*--local government, public education, welfare, conscription, the legal profession, and civil and criminal justice--could very profitably form the basis of European-wide studies on Emsley's model. Emsley's study continues Woloch's trend by demonstrating the institutional creativity of the French Revolution rather than dwelling on its more sanguinary aspects.[4]

NOTES

[1] See the published volume of this colloquium, *Gendarmerie, état et société au XIXe siècle*, ed. Jean-Noël Luc (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2002).

[2] Emsley has also been at the center of a study on the English police. See his *English Police* (London: Longman, 1996).

[3] Clive Emsley, Eric Johnson, Pieter Spierenburg, eds., *Social Control in Modern Europe. Vol. Two, 1800-2000* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, forthcoming).

[4] Isser Woloch, *The New Regime: Transformations of the French Civil Order, 1789-1820s* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994).

Scott Haine
University of Maryland University College
SHaine@aol.com

Copyright © 2003 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172