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Arnaud Guinier, *L'honneur du soldat: Éthique martiale et discipline guerrière dans la France des Lumières*. Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2014. 410 pp. 28€ (cl). ISBN-10: 2876739925.

Review by David A. Bell, Princeton University.

Wellington supposedly called his own men “the scum of the earth,” and in popular culture the reputation of the period’s common soldiers has not much improved over the past two centuries. Recruited (so the story goes) out of prisons, taverns and foundling homes, subjected to brutal and sadistic discipline, and trained by incessant drill to function as mindless automata, it seems no coincidence that contemporary commentators so often compared them to slaves. If these miserable men had anything to do with the world of the European Enlightenment, it was Michel Foucault’s version of it. Foucault himself singled out the military discipline of the age as a prime example of how coercive institutions aimed to turn human bodies and minds into “the meticulously subordinated cogs of a machine.”<sup>[1]</sup>

In recent decades, however, historians have debunked more and more of the legends surrounding common soldiers of the era. In the French case, the groundbreaking work of André Corvisier depicted a royal line army staffed in large part by long-serving professionals of unscandalous background who chose military service freely.<sup>[2]</sup> And, as Samuel Scott showed, the discipline and drill did not prevent large numbers of soldiers from embracing the Revolution of 1789, and quickly moving towards what one Minister of War disparaged as a “*démocratie militaire*.”<sup>[3]</sup>

Arnaud Guinier’s meticulously researched and impressively argued *L'honneur du soldat* has now continued this demolition work and helped to reveal a French “*Lumières militaires*” (p. 302) very different from the Foucauldian version. The book also challenges received assumptions about the extent to which the Revolution marked a rupture in French military doctrine and tactics. It makes for an important contribution, both to the military history of the period, and more generally to our understanding of how French state institutions functioned in the decades leading up to the Revolution.

*L'honneur du soldat* began as a doctoral thesis under the direction of Hervé Drévillon, and much in it recalls Drévillon’s recent *L’individu et la guerre*.<sup>[4]</sup> That book traced a current of what Drévillon called “military humanism” from the Renaissance through to the nineteenth century. According to him, it granted ordinary infantry soldiers considerable tactical initiative and treated them as individuals involved in combat with other individuals, rather than as indistinguishable parts of a greater mass. For the eighteenth century, Drévillon’s analysis raised the question of how this theoretical respect for soldiers jibed with the French army’s rigorous disciplinary and drill practices.

Guinier’s book does much to answer that question, through a close analysis of how these practices actually developed. As he shows very convincingly, they were different from, and far more complex than, what the popular legend might suggest. In particular, he demonstrates that in working to improve its training, discipline and tactical doctrine, the French army constantly struggled to balance different imperatives against each other. (As a direct result, its formal tactical ordinance underwent no fewer than a dozen significant revisions between 1748 and 1789.) For instance, a greater emphasis on rendering

responses to commands wholly automatic and unconscious might increase the precision with which soldiers maneuvered, but it was also held to hinder the speed and fluidity with which they reacted to changing circumstances. Governing common soldiers purely through rigorous discipline without extending marks of honor to them reinforced hierarchy but decreased the motivation to fight. The use of particularly harsh forms of discipline seemed to follow logically from the spectacular military successes of the notoriously brutal Prussian army, but French officers also worried about imposing on French soldiers a military regime at odds with their national character.

Overall, Guinier maintains that between the end of the War of the Austrian Succession and the Revolution, the French army moved steadily away from stereotypically Prussian practices: “Car si l’idéal d’une armée-machine triomphe effectivement au milieu du siècle, sous l’influence d’un modèle prussien particulièrement fantasmé, celui-ci sert essentiellement une intense réflexion menée tant sur les âmes que les corps des combattants, et dont le résultat fut bien différent de la simple validation du soldat-automate” (p. 355). Increasingly, French officials prized speed and movement over order, grace and dynamism over precision, and even a degree of individual initiative over mindless subordination. As a result, “le soldat voit [...] son statut progressivement évoluer. S’il reste un exécutant, il doit l’être de manière éclairée” (p. 203). The army became increasingly willing to attribute marks of honor to common soldiers, to integrate them into the communities where they were stationed (including through marriage), to give them an “éducation morale” (p. 247), and to elicit their consent as well as their obedience to commands. For these reasons, Guinier concludes, the military reforms of the Revolution, which aimed to grant individual soldiers high degrees of autonomy, respect and initiative, did not break as radically with Old Regime practices as historians have generally believed: “Par bien de ses aspects, l’armée manoeuvrant à Valmy est ainsi héritière d’une constitution militaire forgée par les Lumières” (p. 363).

Guinier has marshaled a striking mass of evidence in support of these arguments. He has particularly fascinating material on the “training of the body” (pp. 113-210) that quietly undermines much of what Foucault wrote on the subject. The army at mid-century indeed placed enormous stress on automatic movement and geometrical rigidity (as in this summary of a training manual: “le combattant redressé forme un axe vertical coupé perpendiculairement par la ligne de ses talons et par celle de ses épaules, conséquemment parallèles entre elles” (p. 115)). Over the following decades, however, it increasingly emphasized various forms of looser physical exercise and play, including jumping, wrestling, disc-throwing and even swimming, to toughen bodies while accustoming them to free movement. Guinier also surveys very effectively the close attention given to the psychology of individual combatants, long before Clausewitz’s insistence on making this subject central to military thinking. For instance, the Huguenot-German Physiocratic writer Jakob de Mauvillon rather chillingly explained that the use of column formation on the battlefield exposed soldiers to a greater risk of panic, because a single cannonball flying lengthwise through a column could rip apart as many as sixteen bodies. Line formation was therefore preferable, Mauvillon insisted, and added that its advocates possessed what he termed “une très grande connaissance empirique de la psychologie du soldat” (p. 68). Guinier also notes just how intently military writers discussed ideas of honor and national character in the 1770’s and 1780’s.

The nature of his evidence does impose some inevitable limitations on Guinier’s arguments. It is always difficult to evaluate lengthy *mémoires* that have ended up in an official archive without much accompanying information, and Guinier cites a number of these. Were they officially commissioned, or submitted by a hopeful petitioner on his own initiative? Did anyone read them at the time, let alone act upon them? Did they represent typical points of view, or entirely eccentric ones? Accounts of actual drill and actual maneuvers, especially on the battlefield, most often lack the sort of fine-grained attention to soldiers’ physical behavior that such *mémoires* provide. Even so, Guinier might have given attention to a somewhat wider range of sources, and offered more speculation as to how ordinary soldiers experienced and understood the changes he has so expertly charted. At one point, he offers the fascinating detail that

because of a severe shortage of gunpowder, soldiers often trained by loading muskets with sand, bran or sawdust (p. 171). More material along this line would have been welcome. And what did “honor” actually mean to the French soldiers of the eighteenth century? *L'honneur du soldat* leaves this question very much open.

Such questions are important not just for their own sake, but because of continuing debates as to what a “military Enlightenment” actually amounted to in practice. Jay Smith’s important work on the officer corps, for example, has been challenged by David O’Brien, who argues that relatively few of the enlightened ideas and reforms Smith discusses had much relevance to the most prestigious branch of the French military, the *maison du roi*.<sup>[5]</sup> The work of Smith, Rafe Blaufarb, David Bien, and now Arnaud Guinier, convincingly shows that this most hierarchical of French institutions included many advocates of various forms of enlightened reform, and debated their ideas seriously.<sup>[6]</sup> But I suspect that, just as in the case of many other French institutions at the end of the Old Regime, the ideas and debates produced relatively little effective change, and a great deal of confusion and frustration, out of which revolutionary passions would soon explode. What does it actually mean to call the revolutionary army, as Guinier does, “héritière” to the military Enlightenment (p. 363)? Does it mean that the revolutionaries continued what their Old Regime predecessors had started? Or rather that they finally implemented ideas and plans that their predecessors had volubly discussed, but frustratingly failed to deliver on.

In short, Guinier has not entirely convinced me as to the continuities between Old Regime and Revolution, but there can be no doubt as to his overall impressive achievement in this book. It adds a great deal to our understanding of French military history and French institutional history in the century of lights. Anyone interested in these subjects will find it compelling and enlightening reading.

#### NOTES

[1] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 168.

[2] André Corvisier, *L’armée française de la fin du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle au ministère de Choiseul: Le soldat*, two vols. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964).

[3] Samuel F. Scott, *The Response of the Royal Army to the French Revolution: The Role and Development of the Line Army, 1787-93* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 97.

[4] Hervé Drévillon, *L’individu et la guerre: Du chevalier Bayard au soldat inconnu* (Paris: Belin, 2013); See my review in *H-France Review* <http://www.h-france.net/vol14reviews/vol14no209bell.pdf>

[5] Jay M. Smith, *The Culture of Merit: Nobility, Royal Service and the Making of Absolute Monarchy in France, 1600-1789* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); David C. O’Brien, “Traditional Virtues, Feudal Ties and Royal Guards: The Culture of Service in the Eighteenth-Century *Maison Militaire du Roi*,” *French History* 17/1 (2003):19-47.

[6] Rafe Blaufarb, *The French Army 1750-1820: Careers, Talents, Merit* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2002); David D. Bien, “The Army in the French Enlightenment: Reform, Reaction and Revolution,” *Past and Present* 85 (1979): 68-98.

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