From Individual Experience to Collective Identities

Several generations of Frenchmen were directly caught up in the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. Willing volunteers or reluctant conscripts, they left their families, homes, regions, and usually their civilian occupation as well, to take up the profession of arms. During their years of service they discovered a hitherto unknown world of long marches and bloody battles, penury and excess (looting, drinking), danger and patriotic or military pride, physical and mental suffering (post-combat trauma, homesickness) and endurance, violence and comradeship, and national hatreds and occasional fraternization with enemy soldiers. The majority of these men had grown up in rural communities that were still largely self-contained and unchanging. In sharp contrast to the civilian life they had left behind, men now gained first-hand experience of far-away foreign lands and peoples.

Men cut off from their families and far from home were naturally drawn to seek out the bonds of shared identity from which to build a group or community that would offer moral and material support. Cohesion and unity were further fostered by contact with the ‘other’, allowing soldiers to discover what differentiated them from a community perceived to be different and, in turn, what they had in common with members of their own community. A study of the affirmation of collective identity is essential for understanding the true nature of the soldier’s experience of war. The concept of ‘identity’ can be problematic – in its inclusiveness or ‘plurale tantum’ (encompassing territorially based attitudes as well as feelings of common belonging based on, for example, class, ethnic or linguistic features, or religion), and in its implication of a conscious awareness by the subject of this sense of identity, which is not always easy to evidence through historical sources – yet it remains a useful and valid concept for the analysis of the collective
mentalités of soldiers at war. This chapter will thus address the different categories of ‘identity’ or, more accurately, ‘sentiments of identity’ experienced by French soldiers and officers during this climactic period of their lives.

I. Local and national identity

The awareness of a sense of national identity or national sentiment requires, in Benedict Anderson’s words, the feeling of being part of a national ‘imagined community’. Arguably, the same was true for the sense of regional identity as long as it referred to membership of an area larger than a village and thus precluded individual interactions and connections with all members of the community. This emotional feeling of belonging to a common ‘imagined community’, the strongest antidote to feelings of nostalgia and homesickness or mal du pays, could accommodate different levels of collective identity and lead to a ‘double’ identity, integrating sentiments of both national and local identity.

One of the most basic and most obvious bonds of identity between men is geographical, that of coming from or near the same locality, or of belonging to the same national territory and sharing common mores, food habits, language, and culture. For many historians, the French Revolution is a turning point in the development of a sense of national identity, the matrix of nationalism and national identity in France. However local loyalties remained strong; regional languages or patois were still spoken by the vast majority of Frenchmen. The rise of a sense of national identity therefore did not supersede the ancient and deep-rooted local loyalties, it complemented them. Rather than seeing an opposition or contradiction between national and regional identity, we should thus think of Frenchmen of that time as experiencing a ‘double identity’.

1. Regional and local identity

What is loosely referred to as ‘regional’ identity denotes belonging to the same geographical area, a subdivision of the national territory, and recognizing the same landmarks and referents, such as knowledge of localities, roads, and landscapes, use of a regional language, attendance at the same schools, and familiarity with the same weather patterns and local food. It may be narrowly local, based on the municipality, village, or hamlet that a person comes from – the pays – or it may encompass a geographical zone (an upland region, a coastal area), a department, a