National Character and Transnational Professionalism

Delving into the writings of British and German soldiers, one constant uniting all periods and authors is that commentaries regarding their foreign allies are almost always couched in terms of their national or ethnic origin. Indeed, whenever descriptions are made of allied or auxiliary forces, be they regiments, armies or merely one or a handful of individuals, they are simply referred to as a collective: as ‘Germans’ or ‘English’. The usage of this language reveals the degree to which men in these multinational armies saw the respective components with regard to their nationality, and in doing so used terms that carried with them not only an indication of their national origin, but a collection of characterizations and stereotypes prevalent in popular discourse. This chapter seeks to examine some of these popular conceptions, with the goal of providing a background and a point of comparison for the personal writings and opinions of soldier-authors. The focus here is on stereotypes and, particularly, the discourse concerning ‘national character’, a term common among the writings of soldiers through which their accounts of foreign soldiery were often filtered and which entailed a set of theories about a polity’s collective psychology and innate traits. This emphasis on national character is relevant to the entire period under examination, but gained more value, and greater emphasis at the beginning of the nineteenth century with the proliferation of nationalism in Western Europe.

The eighteenth century has, for several decades now, been understood as a formative period in the growth of a British national identity, forged through intense and continued conflict with France and shared commonalities, such as language, Protestantism and economic dynamism. It was within this context that a British nationalism grew around various cultural peculiarities, shared historical legacies and a
number of emblems that came to reflect the nation as a whole. While the British Navy remained one of these key symbols, the army was likewise becoming increasingly emblematic of the nation – beginning with the brilliant successes of the Duke of Marlborough at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Yet it was within the prolonged struggles at the close of the century that nationalistic sentiments truly emerged in the British Isles, as they did quite dramatically in France and Germany as a result of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. This awakening of a sense of a national identity increased the appeal of understanding the difference between the pre-eminent polities of Europe by means of discerning or defining their national character. For the soldier-author or correspondent, this prompted commentaries on the differences they saw, both from the civilian populations they encountered on campaign and the foreign soldiers they fought with and against. The manner in which these military men articulated these differences owed a great deal to pre-established concepts and themes, which had become better defined thanks in part to many of the Enlightenment’s greatest thinkers.

National character discourse impacted the retelling of interactions between soldiers; however, the focus was not always on nationality. Within their writings, an emphasis on military duties would inevitably alter or override many popular depictions, while others, owing to the numerous universal traits of those within early modern European armies, would not be addressed at all. Furthermore, there were associations, such as military professionalism and a gentlemanly culture among officers, which would transcend national boundaries. These were the multinational and transnational elements that would shape or diminish the peculiarities associative of national character, where professional or class-based solidarities would emerge as stronger commonalities than ethnicity. Therefore this chapter will begin with many of the chief attributes of British and German national characters and conclude with some of the homogenizing aspects of early modern European militaries, as the conflict between nationalism and professionalism would be the primary agents affecting the retelling of interactions and associations between British and German soldiery.

The dissemination of stereotypes

In his essay ‘National Prejudices’, the Irish author and historian Oliver Goldsmith addressed, and hoped to curb, many of the negative characterizations of foreigners he heard during conversations amongst merchants and businessmen in London, lamenting somewhat rhetorically,