

Why do soldiers fight? Where the armies of Europe's *ancien régime* were concerned, the existing scholarship is clear on this point. Life in an eighteenth-century army was apparently harsh and tightly controlled. Common soldiers were exhaustively drilled until they became a cog in a machine (a redolent image of the Enlightenment), leaving no scope for individuality or initiative. They were required to obey their superiors at all costs, or face arbitrary martial law. If they tried to flee the enemy or desert, they could expect to be executed. In a rare example of consensus between military and cultural history, Foucault described a similar state of affairs: the disciplinary regime of the military was a testing ground for forms of social power that would later be applied to total institutions such as the prison, the factory or the school.

Ilya Berkovich's new book takes issue with this interpretation. Building on more recent research on militaries across Europe, and using an impressively broad range of quantitative and qualitative sources in several languages, he presents a very different picture of armies in this period. Soldiers did not just enlist because they were desperate, tricked or coerced: they were attracted by the prospect of a good bounty, regular pay and food, and promises of travel, adventure and social advancement. Life in the army could certainly be tough, but common soldiers did not live lives of oppression, at the mercy of their superiors: there was space for negotiation and even answering back. Military law was not utterly arbitrary: drawing parallels with the current historiography of crime, Berkovich suggests that soldiers were able to use it to their own ends, and that their lives were often governed by a common culture of honour that they willingly signed up to. Finally, this was not 'the age of the deserter' (p. 57) and deserters were not systematically executed: desertion rates were variable, serial bounty-jumpers inflate the statistics, methods of apprehending deserters were ineffective and punishments varied in severity.

Berkovich therefore presents a very different image of the eighteenth-century common soldier to the one that we are used to. The soldier comes across as a much more rounded individual, particularly in the later chapters that draw extensively on life writing. Although this is a military history, arguably Berkovich is informed by the ethos of social history, since these marginal men are here rescued from the enormous condescension of posterity. Soldiers were members of the working class, and yet social history has to date made little use of the wealth of writings by the many soldiers who were unusually literate. The picture that he draws from this material is of an infantryman who wants to be there, wants to fight, has affection for his regiment and (ideally) his officers, and has a firm sense of his rights. Berkovich's old-regime soldier therefore has much in common with the citizen soldier of the Age of Revolutions that followed. This challenges the usual assumption that the late eighteenth century was a watershed, ushering in a whole new ethos of soldiering based on the individual's initiative and motivation, with new battlefield tactics to match. Berkovich's book therefore has implications for wider chronologies in military history.

As well as emphasising continuity over time, Berkovich tends to stress the basic commonalities between European armies in this period. His impressively international perspective (drawing in particular upon German states, Britain, France and Austria) means that examples from different nations are considered alongside one another. Although the effect on the reader can be a bit disconcerting, the book makes a good case for the fundamental Europeanness of the military experience in this period, echoing recent work by historians such as Stephen Conway. This is a useful corrective against national exceptionalism, although the kind of cultural history that we see here does sometimes require more sensitivity to the specifics of context and genre. That said, the later chapters on the cultures of honour and networks of acceptance within the military are particularly valuable, and Berkovich makes good links with recent work on the history of masculinity here. There is more existing scholarship on this than he lets on, but he is correct to say that much of the work on combatant masculinities focuses on the citizen soldier at the expense of his old-regime counterpart. I wondered whether these final chapters on life in the army might have been better placed in

the middle of the book: it may have made sense to organise the chapters along the lines of the soldier's life-cycle, starting with enlistment and concluding with desertion, since it is difficult to account for these low desertion rates until this more positive picture of life in the army fully emerges.

These quibbles aside, this is a hugely impressive first book, with a geographical and chronological sweep that we see all too rarely in historical writing nowadays. Its thesis is bold and will have important implications both for military history and for social and cultural histories of war. The vision of Britain as a fundamentally European state is nothing if not timely.