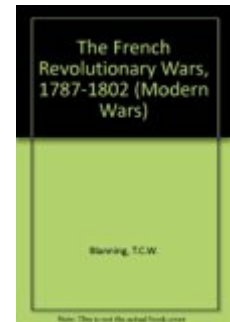




**T.C.W. Blanning.** *The French Revolutionary Wars, 1787-1802.* New York and London: St. Martin's Press, 1996. xvii + 278 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-340-64533-8.



**Reviewed by** Lohr Miller

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T.C.W. Blanning begins his account of the French Revolutionary wars not in the Paris of Louis XVI but rather with the Prussian victory at Rossbach in 1757 and with the arrival of a Habsburg siege army at the great fortress of Belgrade in the late summer of 1789. His aim here is to demonstrate that the wars of the age of the French revolution were not simply the consequence of political and social change inside France, but part of a series of European conflicts that stretched back to the wars of Frederick II and had their immediate roots in the wars that began with the outbreak of hostilities between Russia and the Ottoman Empire in 1787. Blanning's point is that to understand the wars of the French Revolution, it is necessary to know events in Poland and Serbia as much as Versailles; to understand the armies of revolutionary France it is necessary to know how the French army tried to rebuild itself after the disasters of the Seven Years War.

Blanning is concerned less with the structure of French society in the late 1780s than with the relationship of the French Revolution to the nature of war in the eighteenth century. He argues

that "the French Revolution began in a Europe wracked by war and was always part of that war, even when only a passive spectator" (p. 267). Blanning begins his work with an homage to Paul W. Schroeder's *The Transformation of European Politics 1763-1848* (Oxford, 1994), and he follows Schroeder in seeing the French Revolution as an event occurring within an existing states system and whose course was shaped by international politics as much as by social upheaval. Blanning emphasizes that, alongside its financial and social failings, the immediate event undermining the legitimacy of Louis XVI's regime was its inability to prevent Prussian intervention in the Dutch Republic in 1787--an obvious and humiliating failure of the monarchy to defend French interests and (more importantly) French honor. He also notes that in the critical early months of the revolution, the attention of the European powers was directed elsewhere--to war in the Balkans, to imminent conflict between Prussia and the Habsburg Monarchy, to the volatile situation in Poland. The occasion for wresting control of foreign policy from a 'constitutional monarchy' was the conflict between Britain and Louis XVI's Bourbon rela-

tives in Spain over coastal rights in the Pacific Northwest and not any principled discussion of the role of royal power.

Blanning places the origins of the wars between revolutionary France and the European powers not in structural or ideological hostility, but rather in the need of French politicians--and here he means Jacques-Pierre Brissot and his followers--to use a deep-seated French xenophobia to create a war with the Habsburg Monarchy which would offer a means of gaining power inside France. He argues that, whatever hostility between France and the monarchies of Europe existed, it was the need for enforced domestic unity and the Brissotin catering to a belief that European hegemony was the birthright of France as both *la Grand Nation* and the only "free" people in Europe that translated hostility and disdain into armed conflict. And of course such arrogance was matched in Berlin and Vienna by a belief that French military power, defeated by Prussia in 1756-63 and more recently discredited in the Netherlands, had now disintegrated altogether.

Blanning's discussion of change within the French army after the Seven Years War follows Gunther Rothenberg and Christopher Duffy in emphasizing the reforms of Gribeauval, de Broglie, and Guibert in creating many of the weapons and tactics which would sustain the armies of the Revolution. Yet Blanning also points out that the reforms of Guibert were instrumental in the destruction of the old regime. Attempts to purge deadwood from the officer corps led only to a disaffection which paralyzed the army in 1788-89. Demoralized by the failure to prevent Prussian intervention in the Dutch Republic and by a fear of arbitrary and far-reaching downsizing, the royal army proved itself useless in the summer of 1789.

The army that replaced the old royal forces was certainly--at least initially--bolstered by the arrival of large numbers of volunteers whose revolutionary enthusiasm allowed generals like

Kellermann and Dumouriez to employ them without the fear of mass desertions which haunted earlier commanders. Yet revolutionary fervor soon waned, the flood of volunteers dried up, and in any case revolutionary enthusiasm required the stiffening of regular army training. Moreover, as Blanning points out, it was numerical superiority which made enthusiasm effective at all. Blanning recounts the numerous (and too-often forgotten) successes of Austrian and Prussian arms and argues that it was numerical superiority--the French armies had reached 800,000 men by 1794--reinforced by the fear instilled in both conscripts and commanders by political commissars which allowed the French ultimate success in the field.

Blanning's accounts of battles--Valmy, Jemappes, Neerwinden, Marengo, Aboukir, the Russian campaigns in north Italy--are concise, clear-eyed, and sharply drawn. He is less interested in technical changes--columns and demi-brigades--than in the ways in which the demands of the wars affected both French society and the perception of how war could be waged. Blanning follows Francois Furet in arguing that the war led the Revolution, that the massive growth of state power made necessary by the war both enabled a vast expansion of conscription and economic control and allowed an already intolerant and collectivized political culture to generate the Terror. The war, Blanning argues, shaped a new French state in which any commitment to pluralism and constitutional legality had been destroyed.

The book ends with the treaties of Luneville and Amiens, with General Bonaparte dominant inside France and France dominant inside Europe. Yet France in 1802 was deeply divided internally and deeply overextended abroad in terms of both manpower and resources. Resistance to French exactions in the occupied Rhineland and Italy had produced a chronic state of "petty war," a resistance which could only worsen under Bonaparte. It is to Blanning's credit that in discussing local resistance to French rule in the con-

quered areas and in the satellite states created by French arms, he does not shrink from making comparisons with other "new orders"--those of the Soviets and of Hitler's Germany. And after 1802, as the major powers realized the extent of French ambitions, new outlooks on both war and diplomacy would shape the ability of the Habsburgs and the courts of Berlin and Petersburg to resist the French.

*The French Revolutionary Wars* is a valuable addition to any discussion of the Revolutionary era. While never reducing his story to one of pure foreign policy and warfare, Blanning makes the point that the wars of the Revolution were grounded in a larger European scene and that battles fought in Poland and Serbia and the Dutch Republic helped shape events in France. His discussion of the transformation of the French army never neglects the strengths of France's more "traditional" opponents and insists that it was numerical superiority rather than revolutionary *elan* or aristocratic incompetence that gave France most of its victories. And Blanning's treatment of both resistance to conscription inside France and revolt against French depredations in France's satellites makes clear how military necessity can so quickly override any ideal of the "brotherhood of peoples" or political liberty. It was the state power required to prosecute the wars which would finally destroy the perceived legitimacy of the revolution, and Blanning's reminder that warfare can determine political culture still carries an edge in the modern world.

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