

Fergus Robson

French Soldiers in Italy, 1795-1815

Introductory Text to the Exhibition of www.mwme.eu

The lineage of French interventions in northern Italy was long by the time Bonaparte led his *Armée d'Italie* on one of the most strikingly successful campaigns in history. A series of campaigns between 1792 and 1796 saw the County of Nice and Savoy come under French control while limited fighting around the Piedmontese border had given the French the upper hand. In 1796 Bonaparte was appointed commander of the ill-supplied and reportedly demoralised Army of Italy. His troops nonetheless responded to his tactical daring and won a series of lightening engagements which took Piedmont-Sardinia out of the war. The number of men under his command was slowly but steadily reinforced and Italy went from being a sideshow to the main campaign on the Rhine, to the central theatre in the struggle between France and Austria. The latter sent army after army through the mountain passes of the Tyrol but the now battle-hardened Army of Italy destroyed each in turn. Following the stunning victories of 1796, much of northern Italy was in French hands and further advances into the Papal States and Naples saw further expansion of the territory under French control.

This transformed theatre saw tens of thousands of troops stationed all over Italy in a variety of capacities, once peace had been signed with Austria some French troops were redeployed elsewhere but many more remained to guard key fortifications, to train and reinforce the newly created 'Sister Republics', to repress the widespread banditry and rebellion, to maintain an aggressive posture and a military capacity against Rome and Naples. The informal occupation of much of Italy gave these soldiers the opportunity to visit places of legend in French popular and elite culture. Rome as the centre of Christianity, the ancient Republics of Genoa and Venice, the courtly cities of Milan and Turin not to mention the renowned fortress city of Mantua, all drew soldiers to them and inspired many to write about their experiences. Elite culture in France had long looked to Italy, her artistic and musical vitality, her Roman legacy and her curious blend of administrative variety, thriving trade and rich agriculture. Popular culture had its own avenues of engagement, not least with Rome but folk songs also told tales of the sieges of Turin and Mantua, while Piedmontese and Genoese girls disquieted French soldiers' girlfriends.

The soldiers' who were stationed in Italy in these years interacted with the land, the people and culture of Italy in many contexts and they had moreover a wide range of perspectives and

concerns. Some were stationed in isolated hill-towns where they were often at the mercy of local rebels and were faced with a civilian population of dubious loyalty. Others spent pleasurable months in Venice and Milan, marvelling at the luxury of life, the magnificence of the architecture, the grandeur of the classical remains and the daily diet of opera and music available to them. Others still were posted to smaller towns where their main distractions included flirtation and liaisons with Italian women, sampling local food and wine, and admiring the novel landscapes they had taken possession of. This array of experiences all fed into their letters home, their diaries and journals, not to mention the songs they sang and the souvenirs they gathered; elaborating an image of Italy and Italians that was very often more of a mirror of their own ideas of themselves.

This period of relative calm during the occupation phase between 1797 and 1799 was abruptly ended with the War of the Second Coalition. From early 1799 large Russian and Austrian armies in Italy had the reduced French forces on the defensive. Armies in the former Papal territories and Naples came under pressure from local resistance and troops loyal to the King of Naples and Sicily. The demoralising retreat north along the Apennines and the failure of the Army of Naples to link with the Army of Italy meant that the French were pushed all the way back to Nice with an army besieged in Genoa in horrific conditions. The situation stabilised at the end of the year and Bonaparte having returned from Egypt without his army, and having seized power in the *coup d'état* of 18 Brumaire in Paris, began preparations for a riposte. Once again, after having crossed the Alps in challenging conditions in May 1800, Bonaparte's army swept across northern Italy and the campaign culminated in the somewhat fortunate victory at Marengo in June 1800. The shock of defeat caused the Austrians to agree to terms and left the French armies largely in control of Italy for the next fifteen years when innumerable further cultural encounters between French soldiers, Italy and Italians took place.

There are two aspects of these militarised cultural encounters which are of special interest to this project. The first is the soldiers' experiences and meanings that they attached to these. The second side is how these new and altered understandings of French and foreign were transmitted to the civilian population in France and how these ideas might have become part of a wider French identity. Using a variety of sources, principally soldiers' memoirs, journals and letters but also soldiers' songs, sketches and official documents, the soldiers' experiences and their meaning have been examined and interpreted. The transmission and relation of these images of the French 'self' and the Italian 'other' has been approached using a broader array of sources. These include much of the same material used for the first aspect but has

been supplemented with sources such as print and painting in French popular and high culture, folk song and story more generally, advertising and political depictions of Italy and Italians in France while material culture including medals, flags, pottery and souvenirs has also been included where possible. The promise of this approach is that it allows an analysis of cultural exchange over a relatively prolonged but well-defined period while also enabling this results of this exchange to be traced within civilian culture over an even longer timespan. The conclusions allowed by this framework and the methods employed are necessarily stronger for the first aspect given the more direct nature of the source material and its producers. However the broad cultural approach taken towards the second aspect of the problem affords the possibility of a wider ranging understanding of the ways in which the experiences of soldiers abroad can feed into identities and self-conceptions of civilians in the metropole. The array of sources employed helps circumvent the potential limitations of an overly narrow attempt to gain access to the often slow and meandering process of the construction of national identities.

The nature of militarised cultural encounters is subject to change depending on the context of the soldiers' experiences, therefore while campaigning the opportunity for extended or complex cultural encounters was more limited but by no means completely circumscribed. Soldiers might be garrisoned, assigned to foraging or supply line duties, billeted with families. They sometimes found themselves in hospital, lost and in need of direction, threatened by local civilians or passing through renowned landscapes such as the Alps. All of these situations could give rise to dramatically different cultural encounters and all helped shape French soldiers' conceptions of Italy and Italians and as such contributed to their understanding of themselves and what distinguished them from their neighbours. The French presence in Italy also saw many years of peaceful presence and occupation. These situations were much richer in their potential for cultural encounters. Soldiers frequently behaved like tourists as well as soldiers, they visited galleries, explored famous cities, tasted new foods, they went to operas and struck up romances, they attended religious services and made friendships among the local population, they learned local habits and languages and imposed order as well as sometimes siding with locals against their comrades. This diverse array of activities and milieus should have resulted in an analytically unhelpful diversity of images of Italians but the source material indicates that the soldiers in fact arrived at often remarkably similar sets of stereotypes of Italy and her people. This is partly because soldiers swapped stories and often made their judgments collectively but also because they were in part

influenced by pre-existing understandings of what to expect of the inhabitants and their culture.

The ways in which Italian women were portrayed for instance was almost universal among the troops. They were unfavourably compared to French women in terms of their virtuousness and most soldiers who mentioned it maintained that Italian women were more sexually available and less trustworthy than French women. A similar process occurred with reference to Italian food, while at times it was praised, especially its abundance and variety, it was adjudged to be universally inferior to French cuisine. Italian music and art however were frequently lauded as better or at least equal to the best in France. Opinions on matters as diverse as the quality and depth of religious belief, the strengths and weaknesses of the *ancien régime* Italian states, the level of civilisation of the inhabitants, the vitality or otherwise of the population, health and hygiene as well as the beauty of cities and the grandeur of antiquities, were all formulated during their time in Italy and all contributed to an enduring set of images of both Italians and of French.

As noted above, the depictions of Italian women in French folk song reflected the soldiers' perceptions while further evidence for the continuity of this type of cultural imagery can be found in chromolithograph advertisements from later in the 19th century wherein Italian women were routinely portrayed as lascivious, flirtatious and coquettish. None of this is to claim that this was actually the case but what it demonstrates is the longevity and wide reach of the images of Italians generated during the campaigns in Italy and transmitted to popular French culture by the soldiers who returned. Another example, of a quite different set of experiences among the soldiers, which also had widespread cultural ramifications was the crossing of the Alps by French armies at different times during these campaigns. Soldiers' letters frequently evoke their horror but also their sense of mastery upon navigating the different alpine passes. Mont Cenis, Simplon and the *grand* and *petit* Saint Bernard were all described, often in great detail, alongside the emotional responses there was also a strong sense of entering a different land, these immense physical frontiers meant a lot in how the soldiers imagined France and where she ended. These crossings were also immortalised in high art commissioned by Bonaparte, some of which picture him as the successor to Hannibal and Charlemagne, of which the most famous is by David. However these paintings were widely reproduced as prints and later lithographs and many other renditions were of more modest groups of French troops braving the snow, mastering the might of nature and being given succour by monks or locals, the famous Saint Bernard dogs also often featured in memoir and pictorial accounts. This imagery continued to be produced throughout the 19th

century pointing towards an enduring resonance in the French cultural imagination which went beyond, even if it was inspired by, Bonaparte's speedy crossing of the *grand Saint Bernard* in May 1800. Another means by which these experiences entered popular culture was the reverse anthropomorphism of the famous hound, *moustache* about whom innumerable stories were told. This dog became famous as a companion to French troops throughout the Napoleonic wars. His career began when he accompanied the *Armée de la Réserve* across the Alps to Marengo in 1800. His renown in soldiers' stories and folk tales as the steadfast, enduring companion of 'army of liberty' shows how the Italian experience helped shape wider French conceptions of others and themselves. These formative experiences resonated through the arts and popular culture then and for decades.

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