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THE ENGLISH VOLUNTEER MOVEMENT OF THE FRENCH WARS, 1793–1815: SOME CONTEXTS

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I

Probably the greatest popular movement in Georgian Britain was that formed around military volunteering during the wars against revolutionary and Napoleonic France. Often cited is the number of volunteers enrolled in 1803–4, nearly 400,000. These were the most active participants. Outside the ranks there existed an even larger mass of organizers, subscribers and supporters, including sometimes female committees;¹ at this time volunteering was one of several developments which brought Britain recognizably close to ‘total’ war in terms of its population’s war-involvement. Yet historians have said little about the movement. We have not progressed very far beyond the gospel according to Victorian and Edwardian nationalism in which Napoleonic volunteering was depicted as the British people’s inevitable response to the threat of foreign invasion, proud testimony of their ‘warlike spirit’, ‘love of freedom’ and ‘patriotic unanimity’. The only critical evaluation there has been remains based on an article by J. R. Western, published as long ago as 1956.² This refined the established ‘wave of patriotism’ version by linking volunteering with the counter-revolution of the 1790s directed against popular radicals. Volunteers were depicted as armed loyalists, their corps as the successors of the loyalist associations and the movement as a whole as a key component of an extensive and dominant ‘party of order’. The most recent work on the anti-radical reaction barely disturbs this interpretation.³ While it is not denied that the threat of foreign attack was also instrumental in producing volunteers, the emphasis continues to be on volunteering, at least in its early phase, as an outgrowth of counter-revolutionary loyalism.

¹ For the ladies committee for flannel clothing in York see *York Courant*, 19 Dec. 1803, 16 Jan. 1804; for a similar committee in Birmingham see Charles J. Hart, *The history of the 1st Volunteer Battalion the Royal Warwickshire Regiment and its predecessors* (Birmingham, 1906), p. 72.

² ‘The volunteer movement as an anti-revolutionary force’, *English Historical Review*, LXXI (1956), 603–14. The best standard accounts remain Robert Potter Berry, *A history of the formation and development of the volunteer infantry* (London, 1903); Cecil Sebag-Montefiore, *A history of the volunteer forces* (London, 1908); J. W. Fortescue, *The county lieutenancies and the army, 1803–14* (London, 1909).

³ Robert R. Dozier, *For king, constitution and country: the English loyalists and the French Revolution* (Lexington, Ky., 1983), pp. 138–71.

The main object of the present article is a modest one in view of the under-researched nature of the subject – merely to indicate some of the contexts in which volunteering can be better understood. Of these contexts, the most useful work done recently has been on the growth of national consciousness, including the importance of patriotism as a unifying element in political life.⁴ Precisely how much patriotism expressed the divisions and rivalries of an increasingly complex social structure and how much it superseded them remains unclear, but it no longer suffices to see it simply as a device of the ruling class to dissipate the challenge from below. A great deal of patriotic activity originated from and was controlled by the urban middle classes, who, it is argued, used it to legitimate their concerns and secure their status against an enormously powerful hierarchy. The volunteer movement badly needs to be investigated in this context because its social base was urban and middle class to a degree that has never been appreciated. Probably over three-quarters of the corps in the earlier part of the revolutionary war, and over half in the latter part, were town corps. With the great Napoleonic mobilization of 1803–4, this proportion fell drastically; but the movement continued to contain a significant urban element. One can emphasize the importance of the towns further by qualifying the aristocracy's contribution; the country corps were often smaller and less efficient, and many were formed only when the government threatened the counties with a compulsory levy in August 1803.

Among the ways a developing middle-class identity was expressed was through a growing civic-mindedness and voluntary endeavour. Volunteer corps, important adornments of patriotic occasions, contributed significantly to the building of civic cultures in a period when these were starting to shed their old exclusiveness and becoming more public and self-consciously communal. The corps may also easily be placed in the category of voluntary societies which, as described by R. J. Morris, became increasingly important instruments of class.⁵ Through the societies the middle class, under the leadership of its elite, asserted its interests within the aristocratic regime, moulded an identity out of its own diverse character and preserved its power and authority in the towns against a subordinate populace. The key point about volunteering was that it armed the middle classes and might have altered profoundly social relations in the urban communities. That it did not was because the corps had a short-lived existence, and because, even while they lasted, the elites in command of them showed no inclination to defend their interests by use of main force.

A huge armed mobilization, with significant urban participation, was

⁴ See especially two articles by Linda Colley: 'The apotheosis of George III: loyalty, royalty and the British nation, 1760–1820', *Past and Present*, no. 102 (Feb. 1984), 94–129 and 'Whose nation? Class and national consciousness in Britain 1750–1830', *ibid.* no. 113 (Nov. 1986), 97–117.

⁵ R. J. Morris, 'Voluntary societies and British urban elites, 1780–1850: an analysis', *Historical Journal*, xxvi, 1 (1983), 95–118.

equally a threat to the distribution of power at the national level. Volunteers were regarded ambivalently by the state, for while they produced huge additions of armed force, ever more valuable as the military needs of governments expanded, close control of them was elusive. Indeed, the conclusion of the wars against the Napoleonic empire in 1815 saw governments everywhere react against the large-scale arming of the population by down-grading or disbanding the civilian auxiliaries and enhancing the professional army.⁶ The British volunteers felt the steadily tightening grip of government from the time of the movement's apogee in 1803-4. It did not take long before the state acted to be rid of them altogether, establishing in 1809 a local militia which was both more useful for its purposes and more closely under its control.

The conundrum of the volunteers, then, is why an armed popular movement, especially one in which the middle classes were strongly represented, faded so quickly. Sociologists of war (and historians) have hypothesized about the democratizing effect of mass mobilization;⁷ but in this case an enormous and indispensable military contribution by those highest in power and status outside the ruling class brought no substantial rewards, the aristocratic state calmly winding up the possibility of any political-military challenge. The demise of the volunteers has been said to indicate 'just how volatile and potentially subversive this supposed instrument of loyalist control was perceived to be'. Aristocratic dislike of an armed citizenry cannot be denied; there was a basic incompatibility, which democrats and radicals became fond of pointing out, between the 'armed nation' and the aristocracy's privileged position in the state.⁸

Yet in another context, that of the state's military requirements, this view of a popular movement succumbing to a self-interested, manipulating aristocracy is less than clear. When the volunteers were disbanded, it was done in the name of 'efficiency' and 'the public service'. Granted, this was the cloak increasingly thrown around aristocratic rule in the late Georgian period in response to the developing pluralism of British society. But it is also true that in matters of national defence the needs of the state were paramount. In one sense volunteering was a wartime improvisation which the state could never feel happy with because the independence of the corps impaired its military monopoly. Fundamentally, however, the volunteers were an inadequate response to the great changes taking place in the military systems of Napoleonic Europe as armies were transformed by the 'addition of mass' and as states sought effective protection by organizing themselves as 'armed nations'. After 1803 especially, for the rest of the war, Britain maintained huge, mainly civilian-based forces for home defence and struggled con-

⁶ John Gooch, *Armies in Europe* (London, 1980), pp. 50-5.

⁷ Stanislav Andreski, *Military organisation and society* (London, 2nd edn, 1968); Richard M. Titmuss, 'War and social policy', in *Essays on 'the welfare state'* (London, 3rd edn, 1976), pp. 75-87; Arthur Marwick, *War and social change in the twentieth century* (London, 1974).

⁸ Colley, 'Whose nation?', p. 115.

tinuously to make them serviceable and efficient. The triumph of the volunteer principle was never complete because the state always held the powers of *levée-en-masse* in reserve and was continually drawn to the idea of enforcing compulsory service. In the end, Castlereagh's local militia provided for universal training, in effect conscription for territorial service. Its introduction makes it difficult to resist the conclusion that, whatever aristocratic opposition existed, the volunteers were superseded as the less efficient organization. Certainly, there is little point in studying any military institution in isolation from the military structure and strategic environment to which it belonged.

The state's search for efficiency has an even wider reference in the opposition of civilian values and concerns and military priorities. Volunteering ultimately deserves to be placed in the context of the militarization of British society as mass military organizations developed. It, of course, existed at the beginning of this process; but because it was part of such a formative period of British 'armed nationalism', within the movement the collision between society and the army was particularly sharp. The remoteness of large sections of eighteenth-century society from the armed forces, especially the achieving middle classes, is subject only to the qualification that the navy became an increasingly powerful symbol of national success. Even the aristocracy are now said to have 'returned to Camelot' in the nineteenth century; Britain's small military establishment was a lesser vehicle of social opportunity and power than continental armies were and her elite therefore may well have been strongly attracted in other directions.⁹ What needs to be emphasized is that previously there had been nothing approaching the great mobilization of the revolutionary and Napoleonic period – in some places equalling over 25 per cent of adult males. Later, in the age of conscription and total war, the tension in the mass army between the attitudes and values brought from civil society and the demands of the military was alleviated by a powerful doctrine of citizenship which included the duties of military service and national defence. Georgian Britain possessed merely an incipient ideology of this kind.

The result, without exaggeration, can be described as a continuous, largely ineffective struggle by the army to 'decivilianize' the volunteers. Late Victorian and Edwardian nationalists, like Fortescue the military historian, recorded the 'indiscipline' and 'amateurism' of the volunteers as sheer perversity; they had no conception of how people could hang back from participation in the armed defence of the state on the state's terms. The rhetoric of the nation-in-arms was loudly heard during the French wars; but pervading volunteering were more compelling influences – sensitivities about communal identities, status differences, 'civil subordination' as opposed to

⁹ Mark Girouard, *The return to Camelot: chivalry and the English gentleman* (London, 1981). A social profile of the eighteenth-century officer corps has yet to appear. The officers of the early-nineteenth-century army were not predominantly aristocratic, landed or even wealthy: see Hew Strachan, *Wellington's legacy: the reform of the British army 1830–54* (Manchester, 1984), p. 110. The militia in the 1790s soon had to take what officers it could get. J. R. Western, *The English militia in the eighteenth century* (London, 1965), pp. 227–8, 230.

'military servitude' and voluntary public service. There was never a volunteer army, only a mass movement which the generals tried in vain to possess and which the state did not regard as serving it well. Fortescue called this a 'failure', and he named names.¹⁰ But it was actually the beginning of a deeper chronic tension between the professional military and what has been called the 'amateur tradition' in British soldiering in the era of the mass army.¹¹

II

A key aspect of the attempt to militarize the volunteers was a long-persevering drive against their localism which had the aim of making them an effective part of the army and its plans for national defence. Here the 'lively debate' over whether they perceived themselves primarily as a 'law and order' force intrudes, for this role envisaged them acting in their localities against local manifestations of sedition and discontent. There is, in fact, little to this whole issue. For a start, it needs to be appreciated that, along the exposed coasts, auxiliaries were a time-honoured form of self-defence against enemy raiders and privateers, and were appearing soon after war was declared: over half the corps formed in 1793-4 fell into this category.¹² Further, in the Napoleonic war commencing in 1803 the volunteers were hardly ever employed as police, the state instead making every effort to incorporate them into the anti-invasion armies. The priority of the state's military needs had been established during the preceding 'counter-revolutionary decade'. Though the corps of the 1790s can be regarded as local mobilizations of the possessing classes and though they often had antecedents in the loyalist associations and stressed in their terms of engagement their police function, they always lacked a purely local focus in that most came into existence at times of threatened invasion when their logical and most useful contribution was to free the regulars and militia for field service against the enemy. Once formed, they displayed no real counter-revolutionary initiative; they were unenthusiastic about acting as police and the authorities were equally reluctant to employ them as such: not one major vigilante action can be ascribed to them. On the other hand, when in 1798 the government moved to include them properly in its counter-invasion strategy by setting them tasks of guard and escort in the rear of the field armies, there was a high rate of compliance, though it overthrew the principle of local service only. Thereafter the state was quite uninhibited in its search for ways of extending the corps' military usefulness.

'Law and order' thus gave the volunteers an initial identity in default of any other, but one rapidly discounted once the state began to take seriously their military possibilities. Some of the armed associations of 1798 - at first thoroughly parochial and civilian-minded - are particularly interesting in

¹⁰ Fortescue, *County lieutenancies*, pp. 98-110, 119.

¹¹ Ian F. W. Beckett, 'The amateur military tradition in Britain', *War and Society*, IV, 2 (1986), 1-16.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 3.

their transition. Hitchin's, for example, originated in fears that the yeomanry would be called away, leaving the town without any local military force. Having pledged themselves to 'the Support of Civil Order and Government, and the Suppression of Riot and Tumult', the associators proceeded to impose a three-mile limit on their service. But the government wanted more from them than this, and eventually succeeded in eliciting an offer to march anywhere within the county. From then on the militarization of the corps was rapid. It was uniformed expensively, acquired its own colours and band, trained conscientiously, guarded French prisoners on one occasion and joined the other volunteers and militia of the county in a royal review at Hatfield. The review, in particular, cast off volunteer localism, showing them off as orthodox soldiers and as part of a larger military organization.¹³

But the volunteers' adaptation to national service did not mean they ceased being self-consciously local. Corps remained firmly anchored in local communities, often resisting strenuously attempts to amalgamate them into larger units based perhaps on a group of parishes or a town and surrounding villages, sometimes on county subdivisions; as late as 1803 there were only three English counties where the lieutenancies were able to organize all or nearly all their volunteers in a few battalions.¹⁴ Volunteering is interesting not least because, with the exception of the yeomanry corps, county military activity was no longer monopolized by the county elites. So much depended on initiatives taken lower down. Corps were mostly formed at the level of the parish or town; if local leaders did not help persuade men to enrol, canvass subscribers and offer themselves as officers, little could be accomplished.

The prominence of towns in volunteering especially reinforced its localism. Towns were usually distinctive communities, proud and powerful by virtue of their attachment to national networks and their importance as markets and centres of production and population. Volunteering could make a point about the consequence of a town and its status as an independent community. It was also the sort of activity which suited urban leaders, who tended to have an acute sense of their worth, even in quite small places. These elites could not ignore aristocratic power, which besides dominating government and the countryside often extended long arms into the towns through the possession of urban land and patronage; nor could they deny their subordinate rank in the social hierarchy. But they were perpetually on their guard against allowing this lower status to degrade into subservience. Volunteering had a threefold attraction: it enabled them to act independently of 'the county'; it gave them a conspicuous part in public life; it served as an expression of the power they wielded within their own communities.

Volunteering's urban base was laid down at the very beginning of the

¹³ Hertford, Herts Record Office, Hitchin Volunteers papers, esp. letters to and from William Wishe in 1798; J. H. Busby, 'Local military forces in Hertfordshire, 1793-1814', *Journal of the Society of Army Historical Research*, xxxi (1953), 16-17, 20-1; *Cambridge Chronicle*, 13 Oct. 1798.

¹⁴ Bedford, Buckingham and Hereford. I overlook Rutland and Huntingdon.

movement in 1794-5. Though the same period saw the greatest wartime expansion of the yeomanry cavalry, these corps, raised almost exclusively by the landowning classes, were easily outnumbered by their urban counterparts. Possibly ninety-six city and town units and thirty-two county units was the extent of the difference.¹⁵ This dominance persisted during the second national mobilization in 1798, when the government particularly encouraged the formation of armed associations in the towns. A complete list of new corps would be difficult to compile, but there are figures available for several counties. If cavalry units are excluded, it would seem that, except in the exposed and under-garrisoned southwest, about two-thirds of the new volunteers were town-organized. Dundas called a halt to further effort in the towns, apart from the seaports, just weeks after his initial appeal.¹⁶

A renewed threat of invasion at the commencement of the Napoleonic war predictably produced another efflorescence of volunteering, this time by far the largest, and further distinguished by the proliferation of 'village' or 'parish' corps. 'Village volunteering' occurred on such a scale as to moderate greatly the movement's urban bias. Derbyshire, where volunteering was very popular in 1803-4, raised fifty-five corps of which only two belonged to towns. Suffolk, a more average county in terms of volunteering enthusiasm, raised eight town corps out of a total of fifty-six.¹⁷ Even so, the above-average size of urban units and their absorption of smaller village corps continued to make towns disproportionately represented. Dr Penny Corfield, using the 1801 census, has counted 188 cities and towns with over 2,500 inhabitants in England and Wales. These, if the metropolis of London is excluded, accounted for 20 per cent of the total population. The same places in 1803-4 provided about 30 per cent of the total volunteer strength.¹⁸

Furthermore, urban corps were more efficient. From 1803 the larger units were better trained because they were allowed the pay of adjutants and sergeant-majors who had seen regular service. Of the seventeen Cambridge and Suffolk infantry corps graded first class ('fit to act with troops of the line')

¹⁵ Dozier, *English loyalists*, p. 149.

¹⁶ Copy of Dundas's circular letter to lord-lieutenants, 15 May 1798, addressed to the duke of Manchester, Huntingdon, Cambs R.O., Manchester papers, DDM 80/11/20. Durham raised 7 town corps out of 10, the East Riding 3 out of 6, Cambridge 2 out of 3, Hertford 6 out of 10, Gloucester 10 out of 16, Somerset 11 out of 28, Cornwall 7 out of 21. See S. G. P. Ward, *Faithful: the story of the Durham Light Infantry* (London, 1963), pp. 16-18; R. W. S. Norfolk, *Militia, yeomanry and volunteer forces of the East Riding of Yorkshire 1698-1908*, (York, 1965), pp. 45-7; London, British Library (B.L.), Hardwicke papers, Add. MSS 35670, ff. 72-3, 418-19; Busby, 'Hertfordshire', p. 165; H. Bullock, 'Gloucestershire volunteers, 1795-1815', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, xxxviii (1960), 76-82; W. G. Fisher, *The history of Somerset yeomanry, volunteer and territorial units* (Taunton, 1924), pp. 66-97; Charles Thomas, 'Cornish volunteers in the 18th century', *Devon and Cornwall N & Q*, xxvii (1956-8), 229-36, 326-31, xxviii (1959-61), 10-16.

¹⁷ J. Charles Cox, *Three centuries of Derbyshire annals* (2 vols., London, 1890), I, 402-18; lieutenantancy book of duke of Grafton, p. 112, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk R.O., HA 513/5/144.

¹⁸ Corfield, *The impact of English towns 1700-1800* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 8-9, 14; return of volunteer corps dated 9 Dec. 1803, *Parliamentary papers*, 1803-4, xi.

in 1804, nine belonged to towns.¹⁹ Before 1803 the town corps must also have been generally superior, since they were better able to afford drill sergeants at their own expense and had easier access to regular N.C.O.s in the local garrisons. When Castlereagh later was seeking an alternative to the volunteer system, he was prepared to keep volunteers 'of the best description', those 'chiefly confined to the great towns and populous manufacturing districts'.²⁰ The importance of military achievement must not be understated. It developed the volunteers' image of themselves as soldiers and 'protectors of the nation' and made them important vehicles of the community's patriotism. In the towns both this identity and public interest flourished most. Town corps were usually large, impressive military formations, and they were readily used to embellish civic life and establish patriotic accord as part of conscious community-building by urban elites.

Unfortunately we lack precise knowledge of the evolution of civic cultures in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth century. The most thoroughly researched aspect is the polarization of polite and popular culture as the middling and upper ranks in society rejected the beliefs and activities, especially recreations, they had once shared with the poor. Towns and cities, however, as places of intensifying political and social conflict, religious division and cultural stratification, seem also to have nurtured the growth of civic ritual and ceremony whose main theme was patriotism. Under the auspices of urban rulers, royal events (the king's birthday in particular), military victories and peace treaties became important festive occasions. How heavy this investment in patriotism became, compared with earlier in the eighteenth century, and what effect it had on older, customary celebrations has yet to be extensively documented; but it is fairly clear that increasingly the private, exclusive aldermanic feast gave way to public spectacle in which there were very powerful symbolic affirmations of municipal authority and communal unity.²¹ The wars against France after 1793, with fast days, thanksgivings, victory celebrations and various military occasions, added enormously to the volume of civic ritual. Furthermore, the military were invariably given conspicuous roles, and their participation undoubtedly made civic ceremonies more elaborate and more colourful, more likely to establish the meanings and evoke the responses that were sought.

Volunteering, therefore, was closely tied up with the concerns of urban elites and rulers and the growth of urban consciousness. By adorning civic occasions, the corps of a town strengthened the purpose of these ceremonies which, broadly speaking, was to uphold the existing distribution of power and status while making a display of communal solidarity. Much of this can be read into

¹⁹ Return of yeomanry and volunteer corps of Cambridge, 11 June 1804, London, Public Record Office (P.R.O.), Home Office papers, H.O. 50/97. For Suffolk's return see note 17 above.

²⁰ Sebag-Montefiore, *Volunteer forces*, pp. 344-5.

²¹ Peter Borsay, "'All the town's a stage': urban ritual and ceremony 1660-1800", in *The transformation of English provincial towns*, ed. Peter Clark (London, 1984), pp. 228-58.

Bury St Edmunds' celebration of peace in May 1802: the volunteers headed a procession of the corporation, clergy and 'principal inhabitants' which made three halts to read the proclamation of peace, drink the health of the king and queen and fire a *feu de joie*; 4,562 'poor persons' received 1s. 6d. each by subscription while 345 ladies and gentlemen attended a ball in the evening. Military occasions likewise were made into town festivals: the presentation of colours to the Chelmsford corps in 1798 included, besides the military formalities, a church service, an 'elegant' dinner and a special performance at the theatre: 'one of the most brilliant spectacles ever exhibited in this town', the local paper exulted.²²

Town corps were of town elites; their use by urban leaders stemmed from the fact that urban leaders created and controlled them. The public meetings and subscriptions which originated corps were intended to make them appear communal bodies, but the officers were selected from within a small group of organizers and the formal committee of management was restricted to the wealthier subscribers. In practice, once the senior officers had been chosen, the running of the corps devolved on them. Commanding officers were almost invariably drawn from the leading professional and business families; at Leeds Thomas Lloyd, a 'gentleman merchant', commanded; at Belper a Strutt; at Wallsend the son of the colliery manager; at Chelmsford a prominent attorney.²³ Closer research will probably reveal volunteering to have been in most places an activity above politics and other rivalries dividing the elite. Birmingham in 1803 made provision for its Quakers to share the spirit of the hour by setting up a fund for the victims of a French invasion alongside that for equipping the volunteers.²⁴ Volunteering was an expensive enough proposition in most towns to rule out anything that might antagonize potential subscribers, or, if a corps already existed, the idea of establishing a rival body. On the other hand, in some larger centres it was obviously politicized. Partisan feeling was perhaps carried furthest in Liverpool, where the anti-corporation party got control of the corps; and in Manchester where Tories and Whigs established separate units.²⁵

²² Diary of James Oakes, 7, 10 May 1802, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk R.O., HA 521/6; 'Particulars of the ceremony of presenting colours to the Loyal Chelmsford Volunteers', Chelmsford, Essex R.O., library folder (military). See also Hart, *Warwickshire Regiment*, pp. 36-40, for the presentation of colours to the Birmingham associations in June 1798.

²³ R. G. Wilson, *Gentlemen merchants: the merchant community in Leeds 1700-1830* (Manchester, 1971), p. 245; J. Charles Cox, 'Belper regiment-grenadiers', *Journal of Derbyshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, xii (1890), 61-2; Richard Welford, *Men of mark twixt Tyne and Tweed* (3 vols., London, 1895), 1, 425-31 (for John Buddle, major commanding the Wallsend Volunteer Rifle Corps); A. Bennett Bamford, 'The Loyal Chelmsford Volunteers', *Essex Review*, xxxvi (1927), 88-96.

²⁴ Hart, *Warwickshire Regiment*, p. 59.

²⁵ James Currie to Thomas Creevey, 30 Nov. 1803, Liverpool, Liverpool R.O., Currie papers, 920 Cur. 26. In Manchester after 1803 the Whigs commanded the Manchester Light Horse (Shakespeare Philips) and Manchester Independent Volunteers (George Philips). The Tories raised two large infantry regiments, the 1st and 2nd Manchester Volunteers, commanded by James Ackers and John Silvester. Joseph Hanson, who involved himself in radical politics in 1807-8, commanded the Manchester Rifle Corps.

The urban self-consciousness contained in the volunteer movement is easy to see. Less apparent is the degree to which volunteering added to the tensions between urban and county leaderships. The county gentry set the tone of the relationship from the start by allocating the subscription monies raised in 1794 almost exclusively to the yeomanry, the force most closely identified with their county loyalties, rural background and concern for order. Lincolnshire's committee, for example, paid out for nothing but yeomanry, though it raised over £14,000. In Suffolk by 1796 the five yeomanry troops had drawn for £5,736 out of a total defence fund of £7,500, most of the remainder going on the militia.²⁶

These unofficial 'defence committees' had had their day once the government began closer support of the yeomanry through money grants and legislation. Anyway, an increasing amount of military business was devolving on the county lieutenantancies as the organization of home defence became more elaborate. Sometimes the lord-lieutenant acted alone, sometimes through meetings of deputy-lieutenants and J.P.s.²⁷ In either form the lieutenantancy was a powerful aristocratic presence in county military affairs. Yet urban volunteers continued to elude close control. The lieutenantancy was never able to lay down where corps should be raised, nor their terms of service; nor force amalgamations; nor order corps to go on 'permanent duty'. Chichester and Lewes even objected successfully to the uniform of 'ordinary soldier's cloth' the duke of Richmond sought to impose on all Sussex units.²⁸ The most important power the lieutenantancy possessed over the corps was the recommendation of officers for commissions, vital if the crown's military monopoly was to be protected. In practice, however, this authority remained formal rather than effective, especially after 1803 when the pressure was on counties to raise a large force of volunteers or submit to compulsory training. The lower commissioned ranks were filled at the commanding officer's nomination. For the higher posts, the lord-lieutenants generally acted on the assumption that those named were worthy because, having raised a corps and perhaps having been elected by the members, they had proved their local consequence. Only in relatively few cases, where volunteering became associated with political contentions, did a lieutenantancy find scope to intervene.²⁹

²⁶ Proceedings of Lincolnshire's 'Committee of Expenditure' 1794-5, Lincoln, Lincolnshire R.O., Brownlow papers, 4 BNL Box 5; minutes of meetings of 'subscribers for strengthening the internal defence of the country', 1794-7, Ipswich, Suffolk R.O., HD 79/B1. Cambridge voted to spend £1,500 on raising cavalry and £500 on reinforcing the militia. *Cambridge Chronicle*, 19 Apr. 1794. Rutland, Huntingdon and Bedford made similar decisions, *ibid.* 5 Apr., 3 May 1794.

²⁷ For the proceedings of two 'committees of the lieutenantancy' see J. W. Lee, 'Devon on guard, 1759-1815', *Report and Transactions of the Devonshire Association*, XL (1908), 226-37; J. L. Crammer-Byng, 'Essex prepares for invasion, 1796-1805', *Essex Review*, LX (1951), 127-34, 184-93, LXI (1952), 43-7, 57-74.

²⁸ Ann Hudson, 'Volunteer soldiers in Sussex during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, 1793-1815', *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, cxxxii (1984), 179.

²⁹ Coventry and Warwick provide examples, earl of Warwick to Charles Yorke, 12 Aug., 28 Sept. 1803, P.R.O., H.O. 50/89. I am indebted to Mr Austin Gee for these references.

Yet the town world everywhere intersected with the aristocracy's world; and often the aristocracy's presence in the town was more than simply intrusive. So many towns had aristocratic patrons, this kind of aristocratic influence inevitably played on urban volunteering, with sometimes obviously powerful effect. Hitchin's leading men did not think of choosing a commander from among their number until an offer had been made to Sir Charles Radcliffe.³⁰ Likewise, in 1803, the colonelcy of Birmingham's three battalions went to the earl of Dartmouth, whose family had long been prominent in the politics and philanthropy of the town. But what is significant is not that there were aristocratic commanders in the towns but that they were disproportionately few in terms of the aristocracy's urban interests. On the whole, the urban corps were pre-eminently middle-class organizations controlled by business and professional leaders whose political and social consequence rapidly diminished away from their town. Volunteering gave them purchase against the massive weight of aristocratic privilege by putting them well to the fore when it came to a task as vital as the task of national defence.

It was part of a huge patriotic effort by the middle classes during the French wars which caught up powerful emotions; not only their resentment of aristocratic superiority but also their desire to differentiate themselves from the propertyless and powerless poor and forge an identity outside the definitions and distinctions of the traditional society.³¹ For them patriotism was a liberating and legitimating ideology; it made them citizens of the nation and leading citizens because they alone possessed the means to mobilize their local communities. Middle-class confidence and assertiveness soon showed through in the urban movement. Possibly the greatest display of civic militarism outside London was the 'Leeds Military Festival' of 1795. Over a thousand volunteers were involved, drawn from the Leeds, Bradford, Halifax, Huddersfield and Wakefield corps, and the review on Chapeltown Moor, according to one account, attracted a crowd of 60,000. The county aristocracy were represented only by three troops of the West Riding yeomanry who 'kept the ground'; their role was peripheral in every sense.³²

Clearly, with urban volunteering, county rulers encountered a movement largely outside their control; and uncongenial to them for other reasons as well. As volunteer numbers increased, particularly with the 1803 expansion, so they found it harder to allay residual anxieties about placing arms in the hands of the 'people'. Accustomed to thinking of themselves as natural leaders, they saw the problem mainly as one of command: if only there were

³⁰ The Radcliffe family owned Hitchin Priory and much land in Hertfordshire. Hitchin museum has a letter of Sir Charles declining the command of the volunteers. Lady Radcliffe presented colours to the corps in 1799, and the family headed the subscription list in 1803.

³¹ Colley, 'Whose nation?', pp. 109-11.

³² 'Extracts from the Leeds Intelligencer, 1795', *Thoresby Society Publications*, XLIV (1956), 80; Emily Hargrave, 'The early Leeds volunteers', *ibid.* xxviii (1923-7), 272-3; Berry, *Volunteer infantry*, pp. 314-16. There was a similar review in 1796 at Wakefield. See W[ilfrid] R[obertshaw], 'Review of volunteers at Wakefield in 1796', *Bradford Antiquary*, N.S. vi (1933-9), 90.

sufficient 'gentlemen' to serve as officers, all would be safe. But sufficient 'gentlemen' were hard to find in the towns, and hard to find everywhere once mobilization became truly extensive. The Devon lieutenantcy's 'standing committee' wanted every commander to be vouched for by a deputy-lieutenant or J.P., which indicates how feeble it felt its own powers of supervision to be.³³ A major reason why the local militia of 1808 rapidly absorbed much of the volunteer strength was that it suited the gentry's predilections so much better. It was a force firmly under the control of the county authorities, financed at public expense, and with a property qualification for officers. Towns and townsmen could be put in their place, while the moral pressure on individual gentlemen to recruit in their localities, accept commands and bear much of the cost themselves largely disappeared.

Usually the local militia is depicted as an administrative achievement, the last and most successful of a series of expedients during the French wars aimed at producing an efficient home defence force of soldier-civilians. While it was this, it was also the aristocracy's triumph over a movement which, in parts, had been significantly independent of their control and presented a tacit military and social challenge. Castlereagh, in contemplating reform of the part-time auxiliaries, was at first disposed to save the urban volunteers because of their efficiency and *esprit*; but his scheme, in its final form, was deliberately designed to destroy their separate identity and incorporate them into county formations. There was a quite brutal return to the old, pre-war system by which the auxiliaries to support the regular army were all deemed 'militia' and the county recognized as the primary unit of defence organization. Generally, where a volunteer corps transferred its services into the local militia, about one-third to one-half of the members resigned. Officers of town corps were often keen to transfer, provided they could keep their rank; but because not all of their men would follow them and the new battalions were larger units anyway, they invariably found themselves commanding corps which lacked communal identity and were full of young labourers.³⁴ As for the volunteer corps that remained, they were slowly but surely squeezed out of existence by the government's withdrawal of financial support.

So the aristocratic state put an end to military power, especially bourgeois military power, that was localized, communal and self-governing to a degree it found intolerable. Though done in the name of efficiency,³⁵ it inevitably

³³ Lee, 'Devon', p. 230.

³⁴ In Leeds 340 out of 800 agreed to transfer; in the Hinckford Hundred battalion (Essex) 365 out of 525; in Wisbech 152 out of 231; in Whittlesey 86 out of 132. Hargrave, 'Leeds volunteers', pp. 311-12; A. C. Wright, 'Essex and the volunteers', *Essex Journal*, vii (1972), 80; William Watson to Lord Hardwicke, 1 Nov. 1808, B. L., Hardwicke papers, Add. MSS 35676, fos. 153-4. This last letter said 'all the young men' in the Wisbech and Whittlesey corps had joined the local militia, and additional militia volunteers were also 'all young active men'. The local militia enrolment book of the Ely subdivision, 1809-14, reveals that about half the men were 20 years of age or under, and three-quarters were listed as 'labourers' or 'servants'. Cambridge, Cambs R.O., Ely and South Witchford subdivision papers, 283/uncatalogued.

³⁵ For example, see a copy of Lord Salisbury's circular letter to the C.O.s of volunteer corps in his county, 22 Jan. 1809, Herts R.O., Hitchin Volunteers papers.

had wider implications because the volunteer movement recruited urban elites into the country's military system for the first time and was easily the largest military mobilization of urban communities that had ever occurred. From the movement's outset, the state worked ceaselessly to find and perfect the means of control, and by 1804 had succeeded to the extent of having a force of civilians trained, organized and committed to joining the anti-invasion armies. This process deserves to be traced. But the two interesting questions that remain are why the state, having promoted volunteering, then chose to destroy it, and why such a formidable popular movement succumbed so easily.

III

The original role of the volunteers was purely static defence. They were to strengthen the coastal defences at vulnerable points by offering some degree of protection against sudden raids or initial resistance to any serious landing attempt. The volunteers specifically asked for in 1794 were infantry to guard and help work the coastal batteries which were crucial for denying the enemy access to harbours and beaches.³⁶ It was only gradually that a different conception of their strategic usefulness emerged, one in which the better-trained units joined the field armies in the event of invasion while the rest remained in their localities or counties carrying out guard, escort and police duties.

Until 1798 the government concentrated heavily on the militia and fencibles as the most valuable auxiliary forces; nearly 100,000 men were added to the home establishment by the 'additional' militia of 1794, the supplementary militia of 1796 and the Scottish militia. As late as April 1797 a halt was called to further volunteering outside 'the Ports and principal Towns on the Sea Coast' and 'Cities and great manufacturing towns'. At the same time, parochial military associations were encouraged. A cheaper, less efficient alternative to volunteer infantry, they were best fitted for preserving a show of military force in their localities. Clearly the government had no idea of using the part-time auxiliaries except for reinforcing coastal garrisons and releasing the regulars for field service. This limited role was further underlined in January 1798 when the volunteers had their training allowance cut, though the government was well informed of French invasion preparations.³⁷

Two months later an important reconsideration had obviously taken place, with the government now looking to the corps to perform specific military tasks and actively promoting their proliferation. The volunteers became part of an extensive and revolutionary plan of national defence which, like the

³⁶ Berry, *Volunteer infantry*, pp. 58-9.

³⁷ Copy of duke of Portland's circular letter to lord-lieutenants, 10 Apr. 1797, Essex R.O., Tendring Loyal Volunteers papers, D/DHa 01/5; Portland to lord-lieutenants, 15 Jan. 1798, B.L., Hardwicke papers, Add. MSS 35669, fo.158. For the government's recommended plan of association in 1797 see *Annual Register*, xxxix (1797), chronicle, pp. 237-8.

earlier French *levée en masse* of 1793–4, called for the assistance of the ‘general population’ and set out the different services expected of different groups.³⁸ For the volunteers, the first signs of change came when the government appointed inspecting officers, invited established corps to train at public expense and inquired which were prepared to take on military duties within the several counties comprising their military district. From here on, increasingly generous financial incentives were held out for training and service with service defined as *military* employment outside the corps’ immediate locality. Indeed, the government promoted armed associations for local policing and defence in order to send the volunteer infantry further afield. By May a clear distinction was emerging between corps and associations which would stay in their localities and have only their arms provided and units which would serve within their military district and receive uniform and training allowances as additional benefits.³⁹ A large number, having consulted the authorities on what they might usefully do, pledged themselves in the event of invasion to take over the guard of locally held prisoners of war or convoy army supply trains through their part of the county. In London the government even showed itself willing to make the volunteers part of the fighting army by incorporating the eight most efficient corps into the capital’s garrison.⁴⁰

The main problem about the armed nation was making it into a national army. As the lord-lieutenants had to be told in 1798, the multiplication of corps for ‘local defence and security’ would eventually ‘diminish the means which might otherwise be appropriated to the greater object of national Defence against Foreign Invasion’.⁴¹ Over the remaining years of the revolutionary war the military did not seriously prepare the volunteers for field service or they would have tried to do away with the vast number of small corps, often as small as a single company or troop. On the other hand, the volunteers themselves rapidly adopted the ‘object of national defence’. By 1799 the majority of corps, including the local associations, accepted service within their military district and all that that implied concerning an active part in anti-invasion strategy and full co-operation with the army.⁴² This happened so quickly, within the space of a few months, it cannot be put down

³⁸ The key documents here are the Defence of the Realm Act (38 Geo III c.27), Dundas’s circular letter to the lord-lieutenants, 6 Apr. 1798 (for a copy see B. L., Hardwicke papers, Add. MSS 35669, fos. 290–5) and an accompanying paper, ‘Proposals for rendering the body of the people instrumental in the general defence’ (*Annual Register*, XL (1798), chronicle, pp. 184–9).

³⁹ Sebag-Montefiore, *Volunteer forces*, pp. 211–14, deals with pay and clothing allowances. For the government’s encouragement of service within the military district see Dundas’s circular letters of 12 Mar., 6 Apr. and 15 May 1798, B.L., Hardwicke papers, Add. MSS 35669, fos. 246–8, 290–5; Cambs R.O., Manchester papers, DDM 80/11/20.

⁴⁰ Examples are the United Loyal Association of Doddington (*Cambridge Chronicle*, 19 May 1798), the Ely Association (B.L., Hardwicke papers, Add. MSS 35670, fos. 23–4) and the Royston Association (H. Wortham to W. Wilshere, 20 June 1798, Herts R.O., Hitchin Volunteers papers). For London see Sebag-Montefiore, *Volunteer forces*, pp. 210–11.

⁴¹ Dundas to the duke of Manchester, 15 May 1798, Cambs R.O., Manchester papers, DDM 80/11/20.

⁴² Sebag-Montefiore, *Volunteer forces*, p. 199, n. 2.

to financial strains and a grab for government allowances. The crisis of 1798 suddenly cemented citizenship and national defence, especially to the satisfaction of the urban middle classes among whom volunteering found its greatest strength. Their militarization was intense, reflected in the numerous associations which started out as semi-military bodies but which were transformed into fully uniformed, keenly trained units, anxious to show their usefulness and associate with the armed forces. Beyond providing financial incentives, little of this was the government's doing. Enthusiastic and impressively efficient as many of the corps of 1798 were, they charted the possibility of incorporating volunteers into the anti-invasion armies, and made that final step exceptionally easy to take in 1803-4.

The appreciating military value of the volunteers was acknowledged at the outset of the crisis of 1803 when the government immediately appealed for the old corps to re-establish themselves. The appeal went especially to corps in the 'large and populous towns', which had tended to be larger, better-trained and therefore the most useful.⁴³ In return for eighty-five days' training a year and service within the military district under the same discipline as the 'regular infantry', the government offered much increased financial assistance, permanent adjutants and N.C.O.s., some tax privileges and exemption from the militia. Interestingly, a further regulation was made for 'the whole to be clothed in red', riflemen in green and artillery in blue, bringing the volunteer force into conformity with the rest of the army. These 'conditions of service' were first relayed to the lord-lieutenants on 31 March and officially in place by June.⁴⁴ War had been declared on 18 May.

Yet much about the 'June allowances', as they came to be called, went against the spirit of the old movement. Volunteering in the 1790s had been firmly based on ideas of 'public economy', civilian status and local autonomy, each corps considering itself largely self-supporting and setting terms of service most convenient for itself. Now the government was asking for three months' training a year, army dominance and financial dependence. There does seem to have been a reluctance to enlist on these conditions because by August the volunteer strength of England and Wales was only 60,000, perhaps half of what it had been at the close of the previous war and a fifth of what it was to become. Eight counties of the southwest, southeast and East Anglia, traditionally defence-minded, together with the metropolis, provided half the total.⁴⁵ Bonaparte, then, did what the 'June allowances' could not. It was the huge build-up of the *Grande Armée* around Boulogne throughout the summer which made the old volunteer arrangements redundant by requiring the

⁴³ Lord Euston to Lord Hobart [June 1803], Suffolk R.O., lieutenantancy book, HA 513/5/144. The 'printed proposals' referred to in this letter are not in the H.O. entry books. Fortescue, *County lieutenantancies*, p. 60, n. 2.

⁴⁴ Sebag-Montefiore, *Volunteer forces*, pp. 239-40, 388-90.

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 224 for volunteer strength, excluding local associations, at end of 1800. The figure of 60,000 is an estimate taken from the parliamentary return of corps dated 9 Dec. 1803. See note 18 above.

country to create in short-order field armies large enough to contain and then overwhelm the invaders at their bridgehead.⁴⁶ The *Levée en Masse* Act, passed in July, was the first practical step taken; it showed the state's necessity and succeeded in inducing a flurry of volunteering. Designating the volunteer mass for field service made it inevitable that the volunteers would be exposed to a greater degree of central control and army supervision. Soon the inspecting field officers had reappeared, this time taking their responsibilities vastly more seriously. From November, volunteer units began to go on 'permanent duty' for short periods, usually outside their localities and in company with other corps. The key change was included in the new regulations promulgated in August under which most corps came to be organized – the 'August allowances' – committing them to service anywhere in great Britain.⁴⁷

Much the harder part was to erect a command structure which would have reduced the disjointedness of the volunteer force, and, by doing so, made it properly employable. From the army's point of view, it always remained maddeningly incohesive, at best only partially integrated into the country's military system. Volunteer brigades existed merely on paper, but even this could not conceal their heterogeneous character – numerous corps of varying size and discipline – which made them too unwieldy ever to be effectively commanded. It proved impossible to eliminate the bad effects of volunteer localism. Corps often resisted amalgamation stoutly, led by officers anxious to protect their independent commands if they could not achieve higher rank. When corps did unite, they were capable of keeping their own committees and subscription monies, even of continuing to choose their officers.⁴⁸ Neither did mergers necessarily work well. The larger a corps, the more dispersed its members could be, which meant the drilling of the whole could be infrequent and the drilling of detachments uneven. Local jealousies could also fester. The Sutton company of the Ely United Volunteers was never manageable by the Ely commanders, and, after one particular instance of disobedience involving an officer, it had to be disbanded.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Richard Glover, *Britain at bay: defence against Bonaparte, 1803–14* (London, 1973), pp. 87–8, sets out the strategic problems that a French army of 167,000 posed.

⁴⁷ The circular letters and regulations relating to the volunteers from June 1803 to Feb. 1804 are in *Parliamentary papers*, 1803–4, xi, 117–202.

⁴⁸ In 1806 a parliamentary return (*ibid.*, 1806, x, 229–331) listed 1300 units, only 200 fewer than there had been in Dec. 1803. On amalgamations, Suffolk's lord-lieutenant considered 'the Beauty of the arrangement consists in its being a matter of Choice in those who command the different Companies'. He wanted 'the fullest assurance from the Officer who is recommended to command the Corps that the most perfect understanding exists with regard to every part of the proposed arrangement'. Lord Euston to Charles Tyrell, 9 July 1804, Suffolk R.O., lieutenantancy book, HA 513/5/144. For the terms of proposed unions see John Eustace Anderson, *A short account of the Mortlake company of the Royal Putney, Roehampton and Mortlake Volunteer Corps, 1803–6* (Richmond, 1893), pp. 10, 12; Stockport Rifle Corps minute book, 23 Sept. 1803, Chester, Cheshire R.O., DDX 311/1.

⁴⁹ 'Minutes of Proceedings of a Board of Enquiry', 9 Apr. 1804, Matthew Brackenbury to Benjamin Keene, 12 Apr. 1804, Keene to Charles Yorke, home secretary, 4 May 1804, P.R.O., H.O. 59/97. '... the whole Town of Sutton is at present so much agitated by what has happened that I see nothing to be done but to disband the whole' (Keene to Yorke, private letter, 4 May 1804, *ibid.*).

Volunteering had been recommended by the government in August as better 'calculated to concentrate the Force' than the *levée en masse* scheme for training men in their parishes.⁵⁰ But the 'concentrations of force' the volunteers provided fell far short of the regiments and battalions, easily fitted into the army's command structure, that the military wanted. Out of forty infantry corps in Suffolk in 1805, for example, twenty-five were single company units. As Suffolk's lord-lieutenant pointed out, in the event of 'actual service', these small units would have to be brought together and a commander chosen who could well have no experience of handling large formations.⁵¹ Part of the same problem was the volunteers' independence of military authority. The law was precise on the point that volunteers were not under army orders nor subject to army discipline until called out by proclamation. As civilian bodies, ultimately they trained as they liked, under rules agreed by the corps but effectively enforced by the personal authority of the officers. The most the army could do to resolve the contradictions between civilian status and military service was to make known its requirements. Permanent duty was especially useful because it placed the corps under army command and accustomed them to acting under the articles of war. Otherwise the army had to fall back on exhortation about the importance of 'proper discipline', on its powers of inspection and on familiarization visits by the generals who were to command the volunteers in action.

Probably the amount of inefficiency surprised no one; it was an inescapable consequence of local organization and civilian status. But once the whole volunteer structure came to be regarded as suspect, as happened very quickly after 1806, the government saw an opportunity to carry through a 'root and branch' reform of the auxiliaries in which, for the most part, the disadvantages of the volunteer system could be eliminated. With the local militia, what had been the most practicable way of creating the huge anti-invasion armies needed in 1803, but what could never be made efficient, was destroyed in favour of a force which rested on opposite principles of compulsory service, public funding, central control through the county governments and subordination to military authority – the last was achieved by requiring each battalion to embody for twenty-eight days' training a year under army discipline, the 'permanent duty' which perhaps three-quarters of the volunteer corps had succeeded in avoiding.⁵² The development of Napoleonic warfare brought home the fact that the nation needed a fully integrated system of home defence in which mass armies comprising large numbers of civilian auxiliaries would be ready to take the field. By their very nature, the volunteers were always less than satisfactory materials for such a strategic system. In the even broader context of Britain's total war effort, they were too

⁵⁰ Circular letter to lord-lieutenants, 30 July 1803, *Parliamentary papers*, 1803-4, xi, 149.

⁵¹ For the list of Suffolk units see the lieutenancy book, p. 113, Suffolk R.O., HA 513/5/144. Lord Euston to Lord Rous, 12 Mar. 1804, *ibid.*

⁵² A total of 250 corps are listed as having gone on permanent duty up to 5 May 1804 in two parliamentary returns, *Parliamentary papers*, 1803-4, xi, 209-19, 233-49.

separate from the army to assist the flow of men into the army. As the scale of warfare increased, and as the country's confidence in its resources improved, volunteering was seen to be cheap without being efficient and restrictive where the army's recruitment was concerned. Windham and Castlereagh, as successive secretaries for war, had similar basic intentions in spite of their political differences. Both were ready to confine volunteering to the large towns where it was most efficient, and both aimed to increase the reserve of trained men by compulsion with an eye on how this would operate to the army's advantage.

There were, even so, powerful interests represented in the movement, especially the urban elites whose corps were the last to be regarded as irrelevant, patriotically or militarily. Windham aroused their fury with his proposal to deprive them of government allowances. Castlereagh, in contrast, ran into little difficulty and successfully converted numbers of them into local militia battalions. Powerful the volunteer interest may have been, but in little over a year it was a spent force, capitulating tamely to the state's plan for a 'more efficient establishment'. How this happened can only be partially explained in terms of the wartime state's impatience with volunteer inefficiency and the aristocracy's dislike of military institutions they inadequately controlled. The larger truth is that by 1808 the volunteers were a fruit rotting on the vine, the movement insufficiently meeting the expectations and requirements contained within it, especially those of the officers. The rush of resignations, sometimes *en masse* and dissolving entire corps, which greeted Windham's proposals, and the readiness with which many converted to local militia were equally symptoms of the way volunteering was failing as a *social* activity. Behind a serious decline in numbers after 1805 – conventionally written off as the effect of Trafalgar in finally securing the country against invasion – there existed a growing feeling of being engaged in a less-than-satisfying form of public service, and one even unbalancing social relationships. This dissatisfaction and unease signified, in the last analysis, the failure of local rulers, including urban notables, to achieve the control they wanted over the armed democracy created in 1803 – a socially mixed, far more volatile mass movement than the volunteers of the revolutionary war had been. Volunteering neither met the military requirements of the state nor the requirements of its leading men to the degree that either wanted to save it.

IV

The very different feel of the 1800s movement compared with its predecessor is well caught in one inhabitant's recollections of Birmingham's association of 1797 and the town's later volunteers: '[The association was] composed of master drapers, grocers, and such gentlemen tradesmen as could afford time to play at soldiers... The uniform... was blue trimmed with white, and a very gentlemanly cocked hat, so that the costume would either do for the battlefield or the drawing room. The Volunteers were a very different body. Their

uniform was red trimmed with yellow, and a regular military cap. They looked like what they were – working men.⁵³ The writer might have added that the association was three companies strong and the volunteers three battalions. Democratization of the movement in 1803–4 involved, above all, the emergence of larger, socially heterogeneous corps in place of the small, exclusive bodies that had formerly predominated. In the case of Ely we can tell with reasonable exactness how the social profile of a corps was transformed by the huge Napoleonic mobilization; of the eighty-one names on the 1799 muster roll whose occupations can be identified, only four (5 per cent) were ‘labourers’ and ‘servants’; in contrast, 110 out of 262 volunteers (42 per cent) recorded in the 1805 militia lists fall into this category, roughly the proportion found in the general population. About 30 per cent of adult males were serving.⁵⁴

Such a socially extensive movement could be expected to duplicate the relationships of the social structure as a whole. Probably the greatest tension within corps was generated at that major social frontier where those with some property, capital or business, however small the amount, sought to differentiate themselves from those whom they conceived to lack any stake in society. In this respect particularly, the military hierarchy overrode the distinctions of the social hierarchy. In the volunteer rank and file, artisans and labourers, the possessing classes and the poor, rubbed shoulders indiscriminately, even the N.C.O.s being chosen for their military experience rather than for their respectability out of necessity.⁵⁵ How these incongruities were managed is hard to say, no one yet having produced a sociological description of a corps. But we can claim tentatively that the 1790s movement showed that volunteering was especially popular among the artisanry and that when large numbers of them took the opportunity to withdraw on the formation of the local militia, it indicated their preference for a more socially exclusive service. Other kinds of voluntary endeavour served the self-respect and pretensions of these people, identifying them with their social superiors; the voluntary society was typically engaged in work *for* the poor and, moreover, was organized as a ‘subscriber democracy’ in that the forms of election and report were observed, even though control effectively remained in the hands of high-status members.⁵⁶ In the corps much the opposite was

⁵³ Hart, *Warwickshire Regiment*, p. 52.

⁵⁴ The 1799 muster roll is in B.L., Hardwicke papers, Add. MSS 35672, fos. 363–4, the 1805 militia lists in Ely and S. Witchford subdivision papers, Cambs R.O., 283/uncatalogued. The numbers and occupations of men of ‘military age’ (17–55) are recorded in ‘Defence of the Kingdom Enrolment’ book, *ibid.* There is further evidence of the influx of labourers into the volunteers in 1803 in Fortescue, *County lieutenancies*, pp. 110–11, Hudson, ‘Volunteer soldiers in Sussex’ p. 173, Beckett, ‘Amateur military tradition’, p. 7.

⁵⁵ For example, in the Ely Volunteers, out of 25 N.C.O.s. on the 1806 muster roll whose occupations were recorded in the 1805 militia lists, 6 were labourers or servants. Four, incidentally, were ‘victuallers’ or ‘publicans’.

⁵⁶ Morris, ‘Voluntary societies’, p. 101–2. Further generalization about the voluntary societies is largely derived from this article.

true. Paid service underlined the way volunteering smothered important differences of status among the rank and file; labourers and respectable tradesmen alike were equal under the authority of their officers. Pay too went with other rewards, notably exemption from the military ballots. Rewards introduced an element of self-interest where other voluntary action sought to strike an appearance of social responsibility and obligation.

Probably, volunteering most suited the poor; it gave them tangible benefits of extra money and clothing and added to their recreations, while protecting them from more burdensome forms of military service. The enthusiasm with which they took up the local militia is highly suggestive on this point. Nevertheless, all that E. P. Thompson has said about working men's assertiveness and ready defence of their interests is glaringly evident in the 1803 movement. Fortescue, too, on the basis of what he found in the home-office records, constantly returned to the problem of discipline in his account of these later volunteers. Important to remember is that this problem dated from the inception of mass volunteering, the worst disorders indeed occurring when invasion was most imminent. A Norwich gentleman concluded that 'a new set of men' – the poor – had joined the volunteers to add to their casual earnings: 'Half of them are rank revolutionists. Half of them meet in a court at the back of my house, where I hear them damning the King and Parliament. They command the officers and declare openly that they will do what they please.' Three Cambridge corps were disbanded during the summer of 1804; in the worst incident the commanding officer was jeered and another officer menaced with bayonets.⁵⁷ The same aggressive defence of rank and file interests surfaced in the labourer-filled local militia battalions where there were protests over allowances during the scheme's establishment.⁵⁸

It is naïve to think, therefore, that the huge volunteer mobilization of 1803–4 was founded on the pure and selfless patriotism of the poor; or, for that matter, on any conception of themselves as citizens owing the state military service. Doubtless there was a universal desire to resist the invader, but, as with all urges of societies, this was filtered through the complex weave of the society itself. In its social expression the volunteer patriotism of 1803 was more like a popular movement than a recruitment well controlled from above. The authorities turned to volunteering in the necessity of the hour, prepared to run the risk of an armed populace; but they soon discovered they had created neither an efficient fighting force nor something satisfactorily under their control. 'The general armament', once undertaken in earnest, exposes as well

⁵⁷ Fortescue, *County lieutenancies*, p. 199. Companies at Sutton, West Wratting and Little Swaffham were disbanded. For the worst incident see note 49 above.

⁵⁸ Clive Emsley, *British society and the French wars 1793–1815* (London, 1979), pp. 145–6. In Devonshire, where volunteering in the 1790s was distinctly 'plebeian', the volunteers proved to be unreliable during the food disorders of 1800–1. John Bohstedt, *Riots and community politics in England and Wales 1790–1810* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), pp. 49–51, 52, 53, 63–4.

as crime and disorder does the limited social authority of the ruling class, effective up to the point where it did not conflict with popular conceptions of fairness and social obligation.

Lord Sheffield's experience is worth recounting. He developed the happy ambition of creating a single large corps in his division of Sussex, not excluding 'a bad breed of Smugglers, Poachers, Foresters, and Farmers' Servants' who were to serve as a skirmishing band alongside a number of parish-based units. A rifle company and cavalry were to be recruited from 'persons of property'. Sheffield himself was a former army officer. Yet in little over two years the North Pevensey legion was disintegrating, if in fact it was ever serviceable. What was lacking was a sound popular base for volunteering, in spite of the efforts made to respect parochial loyalties and separate farmers from 'unsightly men'. All the indications are that this corps was ground down by the unmanageability of the rank and file, partly caused by but certainly accentuating officer problems. When the legion was finally disbanded in 1806, in nine out of fourteen companies the officers wanted to resign or had done so already, and no others could be found. Sheffield, after this, despaired of the volunteer system: 'a force... wholly inadequate and inefficient, and generally undisciplined and insubordinate, and which, on the slightest dissatisfaction or caprice, might vanish in an instant'.⁵⁹ Here is indicated the full dimensions of volunteer inefficiency; at bottom, indiscipline and disorganization came down to the movement's independence of established social authority. The volunteers were written off, in the last analysis, not as a ragged army but as a force wrongly constituted, having bad social effects and basically uncontrollable.

Officers found the service increasingly frustrating, caught as they were between the army's demands for efficiency and the civilian constitution of their corps. One consequence of the civilian character of volunteering was its dependence on private money. Another was that the authority of officers fell far short of what the military code would have granted them, they instead depending largely on the informal effect of their social status and personal qualities. Problems of discipline added internal inefficiencies to the structural inefficiencies of the volunteer system. Financial problems came to place the movement directly at the government's mercy. In these circumstances it was virtually impossible to preserve the great motivation behind all voluntary action in this period, the sense of performing an important public service in an area where the state could not or would not act, and doing that service usefully and well.

Many corps were living a hand-to-mouth existence from 1804, when to hefty establishment costs was added the expense of extra equipment needed for permanent duty. Subscriptions brought a diminishing return, though they

⁵⁹ Sebag-Montefiore, *Volunteer forces*, pp. 263-6; Hudson, 'Volunteer soldiers in Sussex', pp. 172-3, 175, 178-9.

were needed to meet a third to a half of a corps' expenditure.⁶⁰ Officers paid out heavily to cover government allowances in advance, to 'treat' the men and to embellish their corps with 'extras' like bands. They too carried any debt; the Hitchin corps owed its colonel £444 in 1805; a corps of Suffolk yeomanry owed its officers £1,085.⁶¹ The uproar against Windham's proposals for making the volunteers self-supporting has to be seen in the context of the officers' substantial outlay. Soon afterwards, many obviously responded favourably to Castlereagh's suggestion that converting to local militia was a way out of financial difficulties;⁶² in 1808, with another 'reclathing' due – the government's £1 per man for uniforms covered a quarter of the cost at best – numerous corps must have been wondering how they would meet the expense. As later events showed, few could survive long on diminished crown subsidies. By 1812 the strength of the remaining volunteers was well below the strength of the modestly subsidised movement of 1798–1802.⁶³

Financial pressures and increasing dependence on or competition from the state generally caused the failure of voluntary societies. Volunteer corps seem no exception, given the precarious finances of so many and their eventual capitulation to a state-organized local militia. Yet the fundamental reason for the failure of mass volunteering, as already suggested, was that the mass was too unreceptive to the authority of officers and social leaders. Perhaps this is not too obvious. Volunteers like the duke of Northumberland's Percy tenantry (23 troops and companies strong) and the Belvoir Castle Infantry commanded by the duke of Rutland, recall the importance of the great house in rural society, if not the private armies of the baronial age. However, all corps had to be managed rather than commanded. At the heart of the problem lay the volunteer's right of resignation, which, in the final analysis, made any penalty unenforceable. One of the great attractions of the local militia was that it gave the officers effective authority by placing units under military law, even when called out for training. In the volunteers, the legal powers possessed by officers were comparatively unimportant alongside the influence they wielded as social leaders and the value the men themselves placed on comradeship, patriotic service and the material advantages that came their way. As in the wider society, the elite could not expect to order all things to their liking but could come abruptly up against the interests and libertarian spirit of those lower in status.

⁶⁰ Fortescue, *County lieutenancies*, p. 124; Glover, *Britain at bay*, p. 210; H. J. Wilkins, *History of the Loyal Westbury Volunteer Corps 1803–14* (Bristol, 1918), pp. 36–40; Peplow Ward, etc., to the Bishop of Ely, 16 Aug. 1804, Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, Ely diocesan records H2/6. A statement of account for the Hitchin corps dated 10 Oct. 1805 shows that £1,077 was collected in subscriptions out of a total expenditure of £2,457. Herts R.O., Hitchin Volunteers papers.

⁶¹ Account 'Wilshere with Hitchin Volunteer Fund', 23 Sept. 1805, *ibid.*; 'An account of the cause and institution of the yeomanry cavalry in Suffolk...', vol. 2, pp. 134–5, Ipswich, Suffolk R.O., HD 80/3/2.

⁶² *Parliamentary debates*, 1st ser. xi (1808), 47.

⁶³ There were 68,643 effectives in 1812. Sebag-Montefiore, *Volunteer forces*, p. 350.

That they often did, Fortescue's account of volunteer 'indiscipline' makes clear. Volunteering as a mass movement was always difficult to sustain after the first year. Indeed, numbers shrank so quickly that it is possible to speak of it having a comparable 'desertion rate' to the army; over a two-year period, 1805-7, the volunteer strength declined 25 per cent. Including the losses incurred at the time the local militia was instituted – often one in four – possibly half the volunteers enrolled in 1803-4 had withdrawn from military service under the crown by 1809. Windham's observation, that a 'permanent' volunteer system was 'very near a contradiction in terms', was amply borne out.⁶⁴ The government's rejection of compulsion in 1803 expressed confidence that the influence of local rulers would be equal to the occasion; but, while huge numbers were recruited, the very size of the movement was too much for the elite to hold, and made it essentially a popular movement responsive to popular needs. Castlereagh, in complaining of the 'fleeting, inapplicable mass', even used a phrase reminiscent of anti-radical rhetoric.⁶⁵

Insuperable problems of control understandably worked their greatest effect on officer morale. There are signs of this in the number who threw in their commissions at the time of Windham's reforms, possibly 10 per cent of the total. Many more stayed on reluctantly, held there by their still recent decision to undertake this public service and by their standing as king's officers. The gentry of the country corps may well have been more sanguine about the failure of volunteering than their urban counterparts. They had mostly been compelled into service in 1803 by the threat of a compulsory levy placed on the counties, and, anyway, had few illusions about the difficulty of their task; Sheffield expected raising his corps to be the 'most disagreeable of all business'.⁶⁶ Urban officers, on the other hand, modelled volunteering on the other forms of voluntary action to which they were accustomed. There are striking similarities between the corps and the voluntary societies so numerous in the towns, whether we take account of the committees and subscriptions, or the careful balance of democracy and hierarchy, or the strong and persistent localism restricting outside interference and producing low aristocratic participation. As discussed earlier, volunteering was an important social investment for urban elites as an expression of their social authority. But it had special significance for them alongside other voluntary work because it became an explicit form of *national* service, casting them as military leaders in the system of home defence. By giving up a purely local part in this system, however much this coincided with the government's plans, they underlined the point of their usefulness to the state but comparative insignificance within it. For these reasons they had most to lose from the failure of volunteering, and it was here that it had its greatest social effect. Many urban officers felt a strong incentive to continue their patriotic activity by joining the local militia. Further compensation was very likely found in an elaboration of patriotic

⁶⁴ *Parliamentary debates*, 1st ser., I (1804), 979.

⁶⁵ Sebag-Montefiore, *Volunteer forces*, p. 344.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p. 266.

ceremony in the towns from the time of the royal jubilee in 1809, culminating in the lavish and crowded 'peace festivals' of 1814. The end of the war and the end of middle-class service in the auxiliaries undoubtedly seriously blighted this aspect of civic culture, though whether or what alternative expressions were developed remains unexplored.⁶⁷

V

The main point of the present article has been to suggest that volunteering in the Napoleonic period deserves a better history than the old, surely unsatisfactorily glib, 'wave of patriotism' accounts. Perhaps what has been written above can be criticized for making too little of patriotism. It is undeniable that the mobilization of 1803-4, in particular, says a great deal about the British people's developing national consciousness, and the influence of a 'culture of patriotism' as one of the chief ways it was articulated. Never before had there been such a powerful physical manifestation of national purpose. But underneath its patriotism, volunteering was a varied and complex activity affected by social structures no less than political and military structures. The very fact that within three years of the inception of the volunteer mass an alternative system was being sought tells us that patriotism alone is an insufficient context. And when that alternative system was brought into existence it resembled a modern territorial force, resting, to a large degree, on opposite principles to the volunteers; both the state and, by implication, volunteer leaders had changed their ideas about how military patriotism could best be organized.

Ultimately, the sheer size of the volunteer mass says less about the impact of patriotic ideology than an acceptance of military service, including even extra-local service in association with the army and under army discipline, by a very large proportion of the British male population. The point is underlined by the total amount of manpower taken by the army, navy and auxiliaries during the wars, a mobilization which in population terms clearly exceeded the effort of France.⁶⁸ Little compulsion was needed to achieve this level of participation. In our present state of knowledge we can only surmise that the recruitment of the armed forces was connected with the greater fluidity of Britain's social system; in particular, the absence of a sedentary peasant mass.

⁶⁷ Mark Harrison, 'The ordering of the urban environment: time, work and the occurrence of crowds, 1790-1835', *Past and Present*, no. 110 (Feb. 1986), p. 134-68, notes a decline of 'royal and military occasions' in Bristol after 1815. He also claims that there were fewer such occasions in the 1800s than in the 1790s, though does not consider whether later in the war there was a heavier investment in spectacle and ceremony. For accounts of peace celebrations in 1814 see *Cambridge Chronicle*, 15 July 1814 (Cambridge); Oakes diary, 17 June 1814, Suffolk R.O., HA 521/9 (Bury St Edmunds); *The town book of Lewes 1702-1837*, ed. Verena Smith (Lewes, 1973), pp. 199-201; John Sykes, *Local records of remarkable events which have occurred in Northumberland and Durham* (2 vols., repr. Stockton-on-Tees, 1973), II, 79-81 (Durham and Newcastle).

⁶⁸ E. J. Hobsbawm, *The age of revolution* (London, 1973), p. 119.

Yet so inclusive was the great Napoleonic mobilization that it forms an important chapter in the long-drawn-out process, finally completed with the World War I conscription, whereby the armed forces changed from being marginal into integral social institutions.

Volunteering's special contribution was to bring into military service the prosperous and settled middle classes who, in the eighteenth century, had been distinguished by their contempt for soldiers and soldiering. While these social groups were not permanently incorporated into military institutions at this stage, the state suppressing opportunities for middle-class service by ending the local militia, they re-emerged in the mid-Victorian volunteer force and in subsequent popular military movements.⁶⁹ Military developments thus have their own story to tell of how the state responded to an increasing amount of social authority held outside the traditional ruling class. The fact that the volunteer movement of the 1790s largely comprised urban rulers and their artisan followers serves as a further reminder that, even before the eighteenth century was out, the aristocratic state was losing its pristine purity.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Hugh Cunningham, *The volunteer force: a social and political history, 1859-1908* (London, 1975); *A nation in arms: a social study of the British army in the First World War*, ed. Ian F. W. Beckett and Keith Simpson (Manchester, 1985), p. 9 (for the predominance of white-collar occupations in the voluntary recruiting movement of 1914-16).

⁷⁰ This remark is made by way of noticing J. C. D. Clark, *English society 1688-1832* (Cambridge, 1985), which argues that until 1832 England remained an *ancien régime*, fundamentally unaffected by industrialization, secularization or 'the rise of the middle classes'.