

Soldier's Letters to His Mother: Revolutionary Nationalism

François-Xavier Jolicierc

Despite tremendous internal difficulties, including counterrevolutionary movements in a number of provinces, French armies held back foreign forces after war broke out in 1792, but by 1794 the French forces had made gains even beyond the 1789 borders. Part of the reason for this success

was the nationalistic enthusiasm that developed along with the revolution. This nationalism is demonstrated by the following letters from François-Xavier Jolicierc, a conscript in the French army, to his mother.

Consider: *The divisions within French society revealed in these letters; why such sentiments among soldiers are so important and how political leaders or military strategists might capitalize on them; whether the nationalism revealed in these letters is inherent in the nature of the French Revolution or in any particular phase of that revolution.*

13 December, 1793

My dear mother,

You continue to point out to me, in all your letters, that we must get out of the army, cost what it may. Here are the difficulties and the obstacles that I can see.

First of all, it is difficult to find replacements despite the enormous sums that are expended for this purpose. Secondly, we have just had a call-up of men eighteen to twenty-five; and the call-up of those from twenty-five to thirty-five is being prepared. As soon as we got home, we would have to get ready to go back, regretting the money we had spent. Thirdly, when *la patrie* calls us to her defense, we ought to fly there as if running to a good meal. Our life, our wealth, and our talents do not belong to us. It is to the nation, *la patrie*, that all that belongs.

I know well that you and all the others in our village do not share these sentiments. They are not aroused by the cries of an outraged fatherland, and all that they do results from being compelled to. But I have been brought up in conscience and thought, and have always been republican in spirit, although obliged to live in a monarchy. These principles of love for *la patrie*, *la liberté*, *la république*, are not only engraved in my heart, but are deeply etched and will remain there as long as it will please the Supreme Being to sustain in me the breath of life.

Even if it cost me three quarters of my possessions to have you share these sentiments with me, I would gladly part with them and consider it a very small sacrifice. Oh, if only one day you could know the price of liberty and lose your senseless attachment to material things.

30 May, 1794

What about my lot? I am at my post, where I ought to be, and every good man who knows what's what ought to fly to the aid of his country in danger. If I should perish there, you ought to rejoice. Can one make a finer sacrifice than to die for one's country? Can one die for a more just, glorious, and fairer cause? No! Would you rather see me die on a mattress of straw in my bed at Froidefontaine [his home village] working with wood or stone?

No, dear mother. Think that I am at my post and you will be consoled. If your conscience reproaches you in some way, sell even the last of your petticoats for *la patrie*. She is our only rudder, and it is she who guides us and gives us happiness. . . .

Your son, Jolicierc

III. LA MARSEILLAISE

1. Allons enfants de la Patrie
Le jour de gloire est arrivé.
Contre nous, de la tyrannie,
1. Arise you children of our motherland,
Oh now is here our glorious day!
Over us the bloodstained banner
L'étandard sanglant est levé,
l'étandard sanglant est levé,
Entendez-vous, dans la compagne.
Mugir ces farouches soldats
Ils viennent jusque dans nos bras
Egorger vos fils,
vos compagnes.

*Aux armes citoyens!
Formez vos bataillons,
Marchons, marchons!
Qu'un sang impur
Abreuve nos sillons.*

2. Amour sacré de la Patrie,
Conduis, soutiens nos bras vengeurs,
Liberté, liberté chérie,
Combats avec tes défenseurs;
Combats avec tes défenseurs.
Sous drapeaux, que la victoire
Acoure à tes mâles accents;
Que tes ennemis expirants
Voient ton triomphe et notre gloire!

Aux armes citoyens!

*Formez vos bataillons,
Marchons, marchons!
Qu'un sang impur
Abreuve nos sillons.*

Of tyranny holds sway!
Of tyranny holds sway!
Oh, do you hear there in our fields
The roar of those fierce fighting men?
Who came right here into our midst
To slaughter sons, wives and kin.
Your country

*To arms, oh citizens!
Form up in serried ranks!
March on, march on!
And drench our fields
With their tainted blood!*

2. Supreme devotion to our Motherland,
Guides and sustains avenging hands
Liberty, oh dearest Liberty,
Come fight with your shielding bands,
Come fight with your shielding bands!
Beneath our banner come, oh Victory,
Run at your soul-stirring cry.
Oh come, come see your foes now die,
Witness your pride and our glory.

*To arms, oh citizens!
Form up in serried ranks!
March on, march on!
And drench our fields
With their tainted blood!*