

A Myth Greater than Zeus: Popular Perceptions and Scholarly Realities about the French

Revolutionary *Levée en Masse*

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“[H]ey man, go win the war!” This humorous quip is from Mike Duncan’s popular podcast on the French Revolution.¹ Jokingly made to Lazare Carnot by his fellow members on the Committee of Public Safety, the directive was, apparently, swiftly realized, with Duncan noting, “it did not take long for new committee member Carnot to roll out his great project, ... the justly famous [*levée*] *en masse*.”² While Duncan’s take provides a brief and compelling origin story for the *levée en masse*, that is precisely the issue for those hoping to come to terms with one of modern history’s most impactful and enduring historical events. Ever since August of 1793, the *levée en masse* has been a crucial part of French history, a history often manipulated by governments and nationalists to amplify convenient political narratives. This essay aims to identify and debunk the nationalist myth of the *levée en masse* that has created a popular misconception of the *levée en masse*. The first section focuses on the myth of the *levée en masse* and its effects on its popular image. The second section will focus on the academic reality of the *levée en masse*, from its creation to its implementation. The final section will tackle the most mythologized and neglected part of this myth: the men forced into uniforms who were constantly mischaracterized as volunteers. The *levée en masse* was more than the brainchild of one man, even one as skilled as Lazare Carnot. It was a complex law informed by various factors, forged by many hands, tempered by bureaucracy, and used against generations of Frenchmen from 1793 onwards.

¹ Mike Duncan, host, “3.32 The Committee of Public Safety,” *Revolutions* (podcast), March 29, 2015, accessed April 12, 2024, URL: https://thehistoryofrome.typepad.com/revolutions_podcast/2015/03/332-the-committee-of-public-safety.html

² Duncan, “3.32 The Committee of Public Safety,” accessed April 12, 2024.

The *levée en masse* was bound in patriotic rhetoric and myth from its very conception. The Jacobins painted the *levée* as an obligation for all citizens to serve and protect the nation.³ It embodied an essential aspect of Jacobin rhetoric: that all people of the nation were available to the state.⁴ The language used to describe this mobilization of the country is also essential to look at. As explained by Dr. Forrest, the language referencing morals, rights, citizenship and duties that permeated the decree helped build the *levée en masse* myth.⁵ Reports from politicians at the time noting how young men flocked to answer the *levée* would be the origin of the myth of the men of France, without coercion, eagerly answering the call to arms.⁶ The Jacobins consolidated all of these factors to immortalize this event. This was done by inserting military symbolism in art, festivals, and everyday life to link the citizen with the soldier.⁷ Naturally, these are just the foundation stones of the myth of the *levée*.

The building blocks laid down by the Jacobins would be used endlessly by various entities trying to use the *levée* for political ends; no one is more guilty of this than governments and politicians. Generations of politicians saw great opportunities in the myth of the *levée*, the nation's citizens rising to defend the French nation from tyrants.⁸ This myth has been referenced endlessly by French politicians, who, regardless of political allegiance, call upon it in times of crisis to rally the citizens.⁹ A World War I poster shows French Revolutionary soldiers marching through the Arc de Triumph and morphing into French soldiers, the *poilus*, of the great war, the

³ Alan Forrest, "Le Patrie en Danger: The French Revolution and the First *Levée en Masse*," in *The People In Arms: Military Myth and National Mobilization Since the French Revolution*, ed. Daniel Moran and Arthur Waldron (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 13.

⁴ Forrest, "Le Patrie en Danger," 14.

⁵ Forrest, "Le Patrie en Danger," 19.

⁶ Forrest, "Le Patrie en Danger," 27.

⁷ Forrest, "Le Patrie en Danger," 21.

⁸ Forrest, "Le Patrie en Danger," 31.

⁹ Forrest, "Le Patrie en Danger," 31.

next *levée*.¹⁰ The myth was so engrained that fifty years after World War II, French politicians on both sides kept conscription as professional mechanized armies grew around them.¹¹ This fascination with the myth of the *levée* can not be solely blamed on politicians.

While politicians built off the myth of the *levée*, the historians provided them with the materials. With the French empire's collapse, historians looked to consolidate the history of the French Revolution, and republican historians saw the *levée en masse* as the military equivalent of the *Rights of Citizens*.¹² The citizen-soldiers bravely march off to fight for France with high moral and patriotic courage in their chests. Given the stamp of historical approval, this interpretation was applied to every soldier during France's many wars and referenced by thousands of politicians in thousands of speeches.¹³ First, republicans and later Marxists interpreted the *levée en masse* as a popular and noble rising of citizens or workers when enacted.¹⁴ This school of historiography contained historians such as Francois Mignet, Adolphe Thiers, Jules Michelet, and the Marxist Albert Mathiez, who all spoke highly of the *levée* and, in the case of the latter quickly took up the torch for the myth of the *levée* and ensuring Marxist historians would maintain this myth into the late 1980s.¹⁵

The Marxists and Republicans did not go unchallenged, with the first being Hippolyte Taine and his work published before World War I, foreshadowing the consequences of the *levée*

¹⁰ Sem, *Pour le triomphe souscrivez à l'emprunt national. Les souscriptions sont reçues à Paris et en Province à la Banque Nationale de Crédit*. (Printed poster, Digital Image, 114 x 79cm, Library of Congress, Washington DC), 1918. Accessed April 12, 2024, via Library of Congress. URL: <https://www.loc.gov/item/99613598/>.

¹¹ Forrest, "Le Patrie en Danger," 31-32.

¹² Owen Connelly, "The Historiography of the *Levée en Masse* of 1793," in *The People In Arms: Military Myth and National Mobilization Since the French Revolution*, ed. Daniel Moran and Arthur Waldron (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 33.

¹³ Connelly, "The Historiography of the *Levée en Masse* of 1793," 33.

¹⁴ Connelly, "The Historiography of the *Levée en Masse* of 1793," 33-36.

¹⁵ Connelly, "The Historiography of the *Levée en Masse* of 1793," 36-38, 41-45.

myth.¹⁶ Following Taine, historians would challenge the Marxist narrative of the *levée en masse*, dealing a fatal blow to the Marxist interpretation in the late 1980s.¹⁷ More histories outside and within France were published, criticizing the myth of the *levée* and usurping the Marxist myth in the past decades.¹⁸ Only left-wing radicals still cling to the myth of the *levée*.¹⁹ The past decades have seen the myth of the *levée* rejected by historians and the historiography in academia.

The reality is that outside academia, the myth of the *levée* is perpetuated in movies and the internet. On message boards such as Reddit, there are still people repeating the myth of the *levée*.²⁰ One comment, similar to a critical line from Forrest, reads “[the] first modern example of strong nationalism, and sense of defending not some King but their own country.”²¹ In the movie *La Revolutione Francaise*, the volunteers responding to the Brunswick manifesto and the *levée* are rolled into one scene, showing three columns of soldiers from across France singing the Marseilles and closing ranks as they meet at a fork in the road.²² Scanning the movie for the *levée* decree shows Robespierre’s election to the Committee of Public Safety and goes straight to

¹⁶ Connelly, “The Historiography of the *Levée en Masse* of 1793,” 38-39.

¹⁷ Connelly, “The Historiography of the *Levée en Masse* of 1793,” 45.

¹⁸ Connelly, “The Historiography of the *Levée en Masse* of 1793,” 46-48.

¹⁹ Connelly, “The Historiography of the *Levée en Masse* of 1793,” 48.

²⁰ “How was the French Revolutionary Army so successful during the French Revolution?” Reddit post on r/history with the main question, additional information and several comments in response, Reddit, November 24, 2020, URL: https://www.reddit.com/r/history/comments/k06thh/how_was_the_french_revolutionary_army_so/; “What’s the difference between mass mobilization and *levée en masse*, if any?” Reddit post on r/WarCollege with the question and several comments in response, Reddit, September 27, 2022, URL: https://www.reddit.com/r/WarCollege/comments/xq33d7/whats_the_difference_between_mass_mobilization/; “Why was the levee en mass revolutionary?” Reddit post on r/AskHistorians with the main question, additional information and one comment with two replies, January 9, 2018, URL: https://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians/comments/7p9x3u/why_was_the_levee_en_mass_revolutionary/.

²¹ Forrest, “Le Patrie en Danger,” 13.; “Why was the levee en mass revolutionary?”

²² Robert Enrico and Richard T. Heffron, “The French Revolution Part 1 English Subtitles,” Internet Archive, 2:45:58, 1989, URL: <https://archive.org/details/the-french-revolution-part-1-english-subtitles-french-autogenerated-captions/The+French+Revolution+Part+1+English+subtitles+French+autogenerated+captions.mp4>

the trial of Marie Antoinette.²³ The myth of the *levée* still reverberates online and in movies thanks to two centuries of dominance in politics and historiography.

The misconceptions affecting the perception of the *levée en masse* are not exclusive to online forums. This section is dedicated to the misconceptions surrounding the *levée en masse*, mainly the role of Lazare Carnot. This essay has already gone over the example of Mike Duncan's *Revolutions*, claiming that Lazare Carnot created the *levée en masse*. This misconception is also found in the book *The French Revolutionary Wars*, which states, "Carnot was instrumental in formulating the *levée en masse*, ...by which the republic ordered the conscription of the entire male population."²⁴ The reality behind Carnot's involvement is complex. The following section explains the role of *levée en masse* and Carnot.

If there is one thing to get straight about the *levée en masse*, it was around before Carnot got involved. The *levée* was created due to various pressures on Paris. One of these pressures was the agitated Sans-culottes who purged the Girondins seven weeks before.²⁵ Famine stirred calls for seizures and the killing of hoarders.²⁶ The Sans-culottes called for a *levée en masse* as the republic struggled to fight the coalition, the Vendee Rebels and Federalists.²⁷ The idea of the *levée en masse* took several forms. Sebastion Lacroix's economic interpretation of bread for Paris and soldiers for the frontier was presented by Real at the convention, pushing similar military and financial priorities.²⁸ Days later, Claude Royer called for a mass rising against the

²³ Robert Enrico and Richard T. Heffron, "The French Revolution Part 2 English Subtitles," Internet Archive, 2:34:06, 1989, URL: <https://archive.org/details/the-french-revolution-part-2-english-subtitles-french-autogenerated-captions/The+French+Revolution+Part+2+English+subtitles+French+autogenerated+captions.mp4>

²⁴ Gregory Fermont-Barnes, *The French Revolutionary Wars* (New York: Routledge, 2001), Chap. 4, Accessed April 12, 2024, EBSCOhost eBook, URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2143129>.

²⁵ Scott Lytle, "Robespierre, Danton, and the *Levée en Masse*," *The Journal of Modern History* 30, no. 4 (Dec 1958): 1, stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1876033>.

²⁶ Lytle, "Robespierre, Danton, and the *Levée en Masse*," 1-2.

²⁷ Lytle, "Robespierre, Danton, and the *Levée en Masse*," 1-2.

²⁸ Lytle, "Robespierre, Danton, and the *Levée en Masse*," 3-4.

domestic enemy, revised and read to the Convention as a call for the mass arrest of domestic enemies and forcing them to fight at the frontiers.²⁹ A back-and-forth between the *levée* as a purge or a military reform followed.³⁰ People like Danton, Robespierre, Barère, and others argued back and forth, ending with Danton's proposal to mobilize material and men for the war effort.³¹ Barère threw in with Danton, ending the debate, and penned the decree of the *levée en masse* with the help of new Committee member Lazare Carnot.³² Carnot is critical to the *levée en masse*. Still, it originated from the sans-culotte's demands to crush domestic enemies and morphed into the call for mobilizing the nation against its enemies.

The misconceptions regarding the *levée en masse* continue past its creation and into its implementation. As seen on this Reddit post, the word draft is prevalent and is the number one answer on one thread.³³ The *levée* was more than a conscription for young unmarried men; this is seen in the *levée en masse*. The *levée* covers not just mobilization but also economic mobilization, food gathering, and saltpetre production.³⁴ Married men were put into factories, women in hospitals, children created bandages, and older men gave speeches.³⁵ A big part of the *levée* was the creation of factories to produce weapons.³⁶ Committee member Barère supported setting up weapons factories in Paris to employ the population and stimulate economic enrichment.³⁷ The Committee of Public Safety prioritized stepping up the production of muskets

²⁹ Lytle, "Robespierre, Danton, and the *Levée en Masse*," 7.

³⁰ Lytle, "Robespierre, Danton, and the *Levée en Masse*," 7-10.

³¹ Lytle, "Robespierre, Danton, and the *Levée en Masse*," 7-10.

³² Lytle, "Robespierre, Danton, and the *Levée en Masse*," 10.

³³ "How was the French Revolutionary Army so successful during the French Revolution?"

³⁴ Unknown, "Decree Establishing the *Levy en Masse*," in *A Documentary Survey of the French Revolution*, ed. by John Hall Stewart (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951), 472-474.

³⁵ Unknown, "Decree Establishing the *Levy en Masse*," 473-474.

³⁶ Unknown, "Decree Establishing the *Levy en Masse*," 473-474.

³⁷ Lytle, "Robespierre, Danton, and the *Levée en Masse*," 11.

in Paris, resulting in two-thirds of all muskets from 1793 to 1794 originating from Paris.³⁸ The Committee set up these workshops to keep many of the radical republicans in Paris, as the conspiracy was that once Paris was emptied of patriots to the frontiers, counter-revolutionaries would strike.³⁹ Another potential motivation for setting up the factories in Paris is the sans-culottes uprising against the Committee of Public Safety. Given these volatile elements in Paris, the Committee of Public Safety put these factories down to give sans-culottes employment and a salary and invested in keeping the committee around.

The nationalist narrative around it often oversimplifies the *levée en masse*'s enactment and implementation. As a quick example, the fact that Lazare Carnot frequently takes center stage was not a mistake. Reading through the work of Leo Gershoy on Barère's contribution to the *levée*, how Barère's impassioned appeal and layout of the demands of the mobilization of the citizens was the framework of the *levée en masse*.⁴⁰ The Committee of Public Safety and Lazare Carnot effectively used and modified it to get the most out of the *levée*. Gershoy notes that Barère understood the dangers of the measures he voiced and advised that such measures never be used in peacetime.⁴¹ Still, Gershoy, in 1927, states that Barère's warning has gone ignored, and the consequences are evident in Barère and his generations.⁴²

This brings to question why Carnot is depicted as the man behind the *levée* when the evidence refutes this view. This is due to the nationalist myth and a perception of Carnot. Palmer states that many conservatives elevated Carnot as a national hero and wrongly described him not

³⁸ R.R. Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled: The Year of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 237-238.

³⁹ Forrest, "Le Patrie en Danger," 15.

⁴⁰ Leo Gershoy, "Barère, Champion of Nationalism in the French Revolution," *Political Science Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (Sept 1927): 11-12, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2143129>.

⁴¹ Gershoy, "Barère, Champion of Nationalism in the French Revolution," 12.

⁴² Gershoy, "Barère, Champion of Nationalism in the French Revolution," 12.

as a revolutionary but a patriot whose focus was solely on saving France.⁴³ It is likely that as conservative politicians used the *levée en masse* during Frances's various wars, they made the patriotic, non-radical, conservative indorsed Lazare Carnot its creator and not the terrorists of the Committee of Public Safety. This allowed conservatives to make the *levée* not some revolutionary call to arms but a patriotic measure implemented by the patriotic Carnot to organize the citizens to defend France as Paris tore itself apart.

While the *levée en masse* has several misconceptions related to it, there is a specific area in which the myth of the *levée* has had a massive impact. The recurring citizen soldier of France who patriotically and valiantly rushed to protect the nation from its enemies was mentioned in previous paragraphs. The French soldier's superiority came from the grand ideals of citizens and the country.⁴⁴ The reality is that this was not entirely Jacobin propaganda; some men wrote letters home to their families with patriotic zeal and willingness to sacrifice behind every word.⁴⁵ Examining the period drawings of Jean-Baptiste Lesueur depicts the joyous departure of the volunteers to the frontlines with bottles in hand.⁴⁶ Next to them is a recruitment table with patriotic French men lining up to sign up after learning of General Dumouriez's defection, banners flying, and celebrations all around.⁴⁷ This is a historical window into the *levée's* time that shows enthusiasm amongst men. This only shows half the story of the soldier of the *levée*. For every loud radical in the army were several soldiers who only spoke in the letters sent home

⁴³ Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled*, 81.

⁴⁴ "What made the French revolutionary army so good?" Reddit post on r/history with the main question, additional information and several comments in response. Reddit, October 1, 2017, URL:

https://www.reddit.com/r/history/comments/73qc1s/what_made_the_french_revolutionary_army_so_good/

⁴⁵ Alan Forrest, *The Soldiers of the French Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 157.

⁴⁶ Jean-Baptiste Lesueur, *Joyeux départ des volontaires aux armées*. (Drawing on parchment, Digital Image, 5,902 x 3,974 pixels, Musee Carnavalet, Paris), 1793. Accessed on March 16, 2024 via Wikimedia Commons. URL: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Levee_en_masse.jpg

⁴⁷ Lesueur, *Joyeux départ des volontaires aux armées*.

or to like-minded soldiers.⁴⁸ For all the propaganda speaking of a great army of fearless volunteers, the *levée* consumed a generation of young men.

The soldiers of the *levée en masse* have been the victims of years of propaganda, the greatest being their eagerness to join the army without coercion. These men, conscripted under the *levée en masse*, were referred to by the French Republic solely as volunteers.⁴⁹ This myth of the eager volunteer can easily be dismissed. Alan Forrest notes that the *levée en masse* was the least resisted compared to other conscription efforts during the revolutionary period.⁵⁰ This is often attributed to the *levée* being perceived as more equitable for those being conscripted, an efficient administration and a vast amount of republican rhetoric.⁵¹ The keywords here are the least resisted. Officials in some regions saw men ready to desert at any moment, while others reluctantly followed their orders.⁵² Some areas saw riots and various forms of resistance to the *levée*.⁵³ Mike Duncan tackles the eager recruit myth, pointing out that marriages and desertions spiked during the *levée*.⁵⁴ The *levée*'s unpopularity was expressed not in the initial call-up but the call-ups that followed; communities were wary of the call-up, young men went into hiding at rumours of another *levée*, and some regions did not even bother calling their men up.⁵⁵ The initial 750,000 men put into uniform in 1793 would dwindle from casualties and large-scale

⁴⁸ Forrest, *The Soldiers of the French Revolution*, 164.

⁴⁹ Daniel Moran, "Introduction: The Legend of the *Levée en Masse*," in *The People In Arms: Military Myth and National Mobilization Since the French Revolution*, ed. Daniel Moran and Arthur Waldron (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.

⁵⁰ Alan Forrest, *Conscription and Deserters: The Army and French Society During the Revolution and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), Chap. 2, Accessed April 12, 2024, EBSCO Comprehensive Academic Collection eBook, URL: <https://eds.p.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fec2835f-e7e6-4248-ae3b-db85702c5f22%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#AN=294820&db=nlebk>.

⁵¹ Forrest, *Conscription and Deserters*, Chap. 2.

⁵² Forrest, *Conscription and Deserters*, Chap. 2.

⁵³ Forrest, *Conscription and Deserters*, Chap. 2.

⁵⁴ Duncan, "3.32 The Committee of Public Safety," accessed April 12, 2024.

⁵⁵ Forrest, *Conscription and Deserters*, Chap. 2.

desertion until 1797, when they numbered 326,729.⁵⁶ Even those in the *levée* who liked army life wrote home expressing concern for their younger brothers to find jobs to avoid being recruited.⁵⁷ The *levée en masse* was not some patriotic call answered by the brave. It was a demand by the Republic for France to give it a generation of young men for a war it started.

The challenges faced by these men did not end once they were in uniform. War is a brutal and horrifying experience, and while Marxists like to parade these men above the fear of death, the reality was that many were scared, and many panicked under fire.⁵⁸ Many would be affected for life by what they experienced.⁵⁹ When *levée* troops arrived on the frontlines, many officers saw them as useless; veterans and regular soldiers viewed the conscripts with disgust, jealousy, and resentment.⁶⁰ Of the injustices the men of the *levée* suffered, the greatest was a simple line in the *levée en masse*, “until the enemies have been driven from [France], the French people are in permanent requisition for army service.” The men of the *levée* were not given an end date for their service nor a method to replace them once their service was up.⁶¹ These men fought for years, and an entire generation was forced to sacrifice their youth, careers, and sometimes their lives for the nation. The popular misconception of the idealist soldier remains. It remains due to French politicians and this misconception’s benefits through time. Looking back to the WW1 poster, this poster would not have had the same effect on Frenchmen if they had known the reality of the *levée en masse*, and the politicians were happy to use this myth to sacrifice another generation of men.

⁵⁶ Forrest, *Conscription and Deserters*, Chap. 2.

⁵⁷ Forrest, *The Soldiers of the French Revolution*, 168.

⁵⁸ Forrest, *The Soldiers of the French Revolution*, 168.

⁵⁹ Forrest, *The Soldiers of the French Revolution*, 166.

⁶⁰ Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled*, 99-100.

⁶¹ Forrest, *Conscription and Deserters*, Chap. 2.

This paper aimed to point out and debunk the nationalist myth of the *levée en masse*, which created a popular misconception that still lasts today. The paper first went into the two hundred years of Marxist and nationalist mythologizing of the *levée* and how, even after being debunked, it still affects its popular image. The second section explores the reality of the *levée en masse*, Lazare Carnot's role, the actual wording of the *levée en masse*, and how politicians and nationalists crafted these misconceptions. Finally, this essay explores the young men caught in the *levée* and how they were turned from individuals conscripted into a brutal war into mythological warriors used to lure future French men into future battlefields. Many of the modern examples used in this essay contain material perpetuating the myth of the *levée*. It also showed how the myth is starting to be questioned. Looking over the various Reddit boards, people label the men of the *levée* conscripts; they point out the economic factors and perpetuate the new understanding of the *levée en masse*. The misconceptions still exist, but seeing how much of it has been undone in just over thirty years, it is remarkable progress.

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