Battlefield Emotions
1500–1800
Practices, Experience, Imagination
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‘Emotional Turns’ in Military History?

In the 1980s when I studied history at a Dutch university, students expressing an interest in military history were rare. The few with such an interest were for the most part boys with a militarist streak who seemed not fully grown up. Today, one can still come across those boys with their one-track fascination for weapons, violence and great generals in history—some of those boys being females or 50-year-old men. No longer, however, are they the only ones interested in the history of warfare. The field has come of age—in more than one sense of the word. While military history and political history have moved in tandem since their beginnings and the ‘war and society’ approach entered the sub-discipline a couple of decades ago, more recently questions and methodologies from social, cultural and gender history have been introduced into the field.1 This volume on early modern battlefield emotions is testimony to this latest trend in the ‘New Military History’.

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The publication of this volume, moreover, testifies to still another trend—the ‘emotional turn’ that academic history is said to have taken in the early twenty-first century. Originally developed as part of the histoire de mentalité by the French Annales School and for a long time the exclusive field of kindred social and cultural historians, today historical research into ‘emotions’ has started to pique the interest of other historians as well. Whether one should label this development as yet another historiographical ‘turn’ is open for discussion. In military history the proclaimed emotional turn is clearly not yet in full swing—the authors in this volume are in majority social and cultural historians, not military historians. We may indeed wonder whether such an emotional turn will ever fully materialise in the history of warfare, despite the work of Yuval Noah Harari who is recognised as one of the most influential military historians today. In that sense Battlefield Emotions, 1500–1800 is a book at a crossroads: we do not know where military historians will turn from here.

Meanwhile, no reader of Battlefield Emotions can have missed the many references to The Ultimate Experience, Harari’s book of 2008 that postulated an emotional turn in military representations of battlefield experiences in the eighteenth century. Emotions would have been practically absent from medieval and Renaissance martial combat memoirs; instead memoirs offered mostly factual descriptions of battlefield actions, dispassionate in nature even when they were believed to be serving a greater end. Only in the late seventeenth century would military men have begun to discuss their personal feelings. In the long century between 1740 and 1865 they even described their combat experiences increasingly as revelatory transformative moments that profoundly changed their lives and self-perceptions. It is precisely this idea of an emotional turn in the eighteenth century that is questioned, or at the very least put into a broader perspective in this book on early modern battlefield emotions. In the historical landscape of emotional experiences, practices, and imagination sketched by the contributors to this volume, what are the trends or developments to be noticed—if not Harari’s ‘emotional turn’?

**LONG-TERM TRENDS IN EARLY MODERN BATTLEFIELD EMOTIONS**

Perhaps one of the first long-term trends that draws our attention is the gradual secularisation of soldiers’ emotions in the West. Even in early modern wars that were not religiously motivated, Providence had an overbearing presence on the battleground. We learn from Cornelis
van der Haven, Bettina Noak, Marian Füssel and Ilya Berkovich in their chapters on the emotional practices existing in early modern armies that praying rituals served to prepare for combat, and singing hymns helped soldiers to resign themselves to their fate when marching to the field. In the ideal of the *miles christianus*, moreover, the soldier’s fear of his supreme commander in Heaven encouraged him to act courageously, Andreas Bähr explains in his chapter on the different kinds of fear and fearlessness in the seventeenth-century wars of religion. Hazardous audacity that led to self-destruction, however, was considered to be godless and thus strongly rejected. Other soldierly feelings were also habitually interpreted in such a religious frame, as Brian Sandberg amply shows in his chapter on French Catholic siege narratives from the early seventeenth century.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, God appears to have lost part of his influence. Soldiers became increasingly motivated by a newly promoted love for the fatherland, they sang (proto-)nationalistic songs next to hymns and derived their courage from other ideals, such as their families at home in need of protection. This trend was further strengthened by the introduction of mass conscription, replacing the largely foreign and itinerant mercenaries of the ancien régime by young citizen-soldiers from one’s own country. God certainly did not disappear from the battlefields but in Europe his presence and divine interventions carried less weight than before.

Representations of battlefield emotions in European public media underwent a similar process of gradual secularisation. From the late seventeenth and eighteenth century onwards this process seems to have split into two different directions: on the one hand a trend of rejecting human aggression and ferocious passions in leading theories on art and in the writings of important Enlightenment thinkers, as we saw discussed mainly by Valerie Mainz; and on the other, a further romanticising of martial emotions by a wider audience, as described by Marian Füssel, Philip Shaw and most elaborately by Ian Germani, who argues that revolutionary ideologies of patriotic self-sacrifice fostered an essentially romantic understanding of battlefield emotions at the end of the eighteenth century—an understanding that continued well into the next. This trend has also been characterised as a ‘sentimentalising’ of warfare in public imagery, linking this development to the unfolding culture of sensibility and sublimity which Harari believed to be at the roots of the revelatory experiences of his military memoirists.
Hand in hand with this trend of romanticising went a further marketing of martial emotions and heroism for the wider public in the eighteenth century. To be sure, the feelings and experiences of the military had moved and appealed to civilians from much earlier on, even in the ‘iron’ seventeenth century, as we read in the chapters by Sandberg on printed siege narratives and by Lisa De Boer who teases out the emotional layers of Dutch siege maps and genre scenes of soldiers made by the Dutch painter Gerard ter Borch. Siege maps and narratives were mass-printed in myriad formats and they functioned as emotive objects for soldiers and citizens alike. Some siege maps even had a material afterlife on expensive tapestry, stained glassware and silver.

Thanks to the ongoing consumer revolution in Western Europe, however, eighteenth-century businessmen and women could further capitalise on these kind of emotions by bringing an endless stream of war memorabilia on the market, affordable for a broader segment of the population. In his chapter on the Seven Years’ War, Füssel tells us how celebratory ribbons, mugs and snuffboxes allowed for a further identification with and romanticising of battles and sieges. Shaw informs us of the ‘Valenciennes helmets’, fashionable bonnets designed for British women to celebrate the victory of Valenciennes in 1793.

The public’s affective responses to warfare and battles were thus far from spontaneous. Politicians and government officials frequently attempted to create an “emotional ancien régime” in favour of war, and they enlisted the help of artists, art critics, theatre- and print-makers, as Shaw records in his chapter on British military art in the 1790s. In France in the same period, according to Germani, journalists, painters and engravers likewise glamorised and sentimentalised soldiers’ war experiences. Both authors, however, underline that such a bellicose emotional ancien régime was not entirely overpowering: its emotional standards did not completely suppress dissent views nor contrary affective experiences raised by the war such as shame, melancholy, anxiety, fear or sympathy for the enemy. The British cartoons displaying anti-war sentiments reproduced in Shaw’s contribution remind us that a pacifist tendency to reject war and human suffering was equally present in the public sphere of the time, as is also argued by Mainz.

A last relevant trend to take note of transpired in the historical development of warfare strategies and theories in Europe. There we can observe an increasingly professional approach to the chaos of the battlefield and the emotions of the military, starting with the introduction of a rational drill system by Maurice of Nassau in the late sixteenth century and
eventually leading to the emergence of a military science of the mind in the modern era. In the opening chapter van der Haven suggests that military drill—usually considered as a rationalised performative practice suppressing the individual soldier’s emotions—should be recognised as an emotional practice, meant to set an army in motion, not only physically but also emotionally. Sandberg describes how a famous French commander in the early seventeenth century—despite the rise of neo-stoic ideals in French military culture of the time—frequently put his emotions on display, precisely at moments when they would strengthen the exercise of his military command. What we can learn from these chapters is that the Western pursuit of military professionalism, rationality and efficiency did not exclude the strategic and performative use of emotions—to the contrary, one might perhaps say. In her chapter on seventeenth-century Dutch art De Boer develops a similar thesis about the emotional appeal of the rational, orderly format of siege maps, emphasising that some early modern emotions may have looked (and possibly felt) different than today’s.

For military theorists, meanwhile, it has been very difficult to get a handle on battlefield emotions. During the early modern period many of them consciously neglected this human element in their predominantly prescriptive treatises on scientific warfare, or advocated detachment as superior way to deal with the emotions of warfare. Still, later military theorists developed a renewed interest in battlefield emotions. This was pointed out in the two papers on rationalised warfare around 1800 which, though not included in this volume, were presented by Ben Schoenmaker and Cornelis van der Haven at the international workshop on Battlefield Emotions in Ghent in February 2014. Though still struggling to combine rational analysis and the way emotions manifested themselves on battlefields, military thinkers such as Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) and Georg Heinrich von Berenhorst (1733–1814) realised that in order to understand what happened during battles, a rational ‘science of warfare’ could no longer ignore the combatants’ psyche.

**THE AFFECTIVE HARD CORE OF MILITARY CULTURE**

Yet, when reading these chapters on early modern battlefield emotions in Europe, an attentive observer might not only perceive these trends but also be struck by the continuities in the military’s emotional experiences, standards and practices over the centuries. Even with the radically changing material reality of the battlefield during this period, readers cannot fail
to notice the prolonged presence of particular key emotions and feelings which were imposed, performed, and experienced in European ancien régime armies—such as courage, comradeship, compassion, devotion, calmness, and the desire for honour.

Honour was not only a crucial asset for aristocratic officers who sometimes claimed a monopoly on this quality but also for more ordinary men (and women) who cherished their own notions of honour, as social historians have come to realise over the last decades. This is amplified by Berkovich’s argument that fear of losing the respect of one’s peers and thus one’s honour was an important combat motivation among the common soldiers of the eighteenth century. Towards the end of that century, the age-old emphasis on glory and honour may have been temporarily pushed aside by a new emphasis on patriotic devotion, as Germani suggests in his chapter on the French revolutionary armies, but honour and glory re-emerged as combat motivations after the Thermidor in 1794. Honour and respect still play important roles in modern-day armies. Today’s Western psychology and society, however, no longer recognises that the longing for honour is essentially an ‘emotion’. Yet, the desire for honour belonged to the early modern category of the ‘passions’ and its importance as an emotional drive has been uncovered again due to the work of Ute Frevert.11

As De Boer argues in her chapter, the same can be said of the ‘love of truth’ and the feeling state of tranquillitas, a stoic calmness of the mind, which nowadays are no longer identified as emotions or feelings but still occupied a place among the ‘calmer passions’ in psychological treatises of the early modern period. Tranquillity, which according to moral philosophers of the time amounted to a great courage of the mind, as van der Haven explains in his chapter, was a critical feeling for any fighter throughout the early modern period. Berkovich’s chapter shows that, though usually associated with officers and commanders, tranquillity was important as an emotional standard for eighteenth-century infantrymen, who were not allowed to break formation when coming under heavy fire. In the revolutionary period, Germani tells us, the citizen-soldier lived with the expectation (to a large part internalised) that he would not only sacrifice himself for the sake of la patrie but do this in an utterly stoic manner as well.

Devotion is another feeling state that does not customarily connote the military. It nonetheless formed a steady presence in the army camps and battles of the early modern period. Its object could range from God to king to family, from beloved commanders to true comrades, from a beleaguered
home town to a precious fatherland, and in some cases it would be named loyalty rather than devotion. The emotional experience itself may have differed when the label and the object differed, but for many a soldier—whether living in the sixteenth, seventeenth, or eighteenth century—devotion was the emotion that kept him going, made him courageous, and helped him through the gruesome experience of the battle or siege. Combat required hard emotional labour, as was explained in the Introduction to this volume. Devotion functioned as an emotional coping strategy, comparable to honour and tranquility, both for officers and the rank and file in early modern armies.

If devotion to the army could lead to courage at crucial moments, it could also lead to compassion for heavily injured comrades-in-arms and even, paradoxically perhaps, to compassion for deadly wounded adversaries. Noak recounts the sixteenth-century story of an elderly soldier who, with one bold cut across the throat, gently helped the incurably wounded to their end when the battle was over and the army surgeon had given up on them—an act of mercy rather than of cruelty. One of the insights we can gain from Noak’s chapter on field surgery in the sixteenth and seventeenth century is that boldness and compassion do not exclude each other. Compassion and manly tears became trending topics in eighteenth-century literature and arts, as is also mentioned by Mainz in her chapter on the art of battle painting, but what the above and other stories indicate is that these emotional experiences may have been steady companions to battlefield actions from much earlier on.\(^\text{12}\)

Historians should be careful not to ascribe a trans-historical essence to battlefields and be equally wary of projecting trans-historical emotions on to historical actors—after all, the final word is still out on whether emotions are hard-wired in the human brain or not. What the preceding chapters in *Battlefield Emotions* nevertheless suggest is that in Europe in the early modern period—even with the secularising trend mentioned above—changes in military emotional cultures may not have been all that drastic or fundamental: for centuries a small number of soldierly emotions and feelings continued to form the affective hard core of military culture. Armies used ‘emotional practices’ to grind certain affects into the men’s minds and bodies, and thus make them part of their ‘emotional habitus’—to borrow a phrase from Monique Scheer and Pierre Bourdieu.\(^\text{13}\) The chapter by van der Haven teaches us that this is a fruitful angle for research, worthwhile exploring for other historians who are writing about emotions in the army. This is also true of other concepts from the history of emotions, such as the concept of ‘emotional community’.
EMOTIONAL COMMUNITIES IN THE ARMY

As brought up in the Introduction, the military living in army camps and garrisons could be seen as ‘emotional communities’ whose members, following Barbara Rosenwein who coined the phrase, shared the same ‘systems of feeling’: the men had the same assessments of what was valuable or harmful to them, they evaluated other’s emotions in identical ways, their ideas about the nature of affective bonds between people were very much alike, and they had a similar attitude towards modes of emotional expression that were to be expected, encouraged, tolerated or deplored.¹⁴ This observation, however, raises questions about the coherence of these emotional communities to which the research presented in this volume does not offer entirely satisfactory answers.

One question to pursue in the future would concern the social, spatial and possibly emotional gap between the officers and the rank and file in early modern armies. In the previous paragraph I concluded that men in the army basically shared the same ideas about soldierly emotions and performances even when these men were of different background and status. They all valued, for instance, bravery, honour, loyalty, composure, toughness. Yet ideas about appropriate expressions of toughness, to name one example, or notions of whose loss was to be mourned, or what was to be feared, may not have entirely corresponded between the ranks.

Seventeenth-century siege narratives studied by Sandberg suggest that the loss of ordinary soldiers struck officers as less tragic than the loss of noble officers. It is a fair guess, however, that common soldiers would have been more affected by the death of their comrades. Füssel contends that eighteenth-century commanding officers had different perceptions and afterward different memories of the fighting than the lower-ranked soldiers because of their overall spatial distance from the battlefield. We may expect that their assessments of what was harmful or valuable at the battlefield, and the resulting emotions, would also have differed considerably because of this. Still, not all eighteenth-century officers remained at the same distance from the battlefield, as Berkovich explains in his chapter. Officers headed the infantry lines when they marched forward to the enemy and they were exposed to the same hostile fire as their troops. What is more, in that front position officers also ran the risk of being shot by their own men, accidentally or intentionally as a retaliation for previous disciplinary actions taken against them. In consequence, Berkovich argues, ancien régime military discipline in Europe may well have been less brutal than is usually depicted.
Moreover, officers may have feared their subordinates more than subordinates allegedly feared their officers. Class differences, military hierarchy, and the "politics of emotions" enforced on soldiers in the ranks indisputably affected the social and psychological reality of battles and camp lives, making questions about the coherence of emotional communities in early modern armies all the more pertinent: should we consider an army as essentially one emotional community sharing the same emotional codes and habitus, or did the military form sub-groups with distinct emotional sub-cultures whose intricacies we still have to explore?

Other questions are raised by the observation that early modern army camps in Europe were not only populated by men but also by women. I am not referring here to the female soldiers who dressed, acted and passed for men until exposed (which for some of them may never have happened), but to the wives, washerwomen, vivandières and other camp followers. These women were not an official group within the armed forces but they formed a presence nonetheless. How did their involvement bear on the emotional communities of the men? And what about other civilians, for instance the ones who lodged officers in their homes for extended lengths of time, or the ones living and working in the vicinity of guardrooms in garrison cities? Perhaps we should reconsider the assumption that the European military and citizenry formed separate emotional communities. In some early modern settings their worlds may not have been as far apart—spatially, socially, mentally—as is often assumed.

Germani, Fissel and Shaw all describe the increasing affective links between combatants and civilian followers for the eighteenth century. Such links existed in the preceding centuries as well. De Boer argues that siege warfare in the landward provinces of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic favoured a sedentary military lifestyle in garrison cities which "helped effect a rapprochement between the military and the citizenry". Painter Gerard ter Borch, for instance, was on such intimate terms with the soldiers billeted in his town that he endowed them with the same individual emotional life as ordinary citizens. In that very same period Dutch civilian playwrights engaged with emotional practices in the army, testimony to the civic desire to better understand and get closer to the military, as we learn from van der Haven in his chapter on the similarities between civic poetry and military treatises. Noak furthermore describes how medical case histories stemming from battlefields stimulated the production of medical knowledge about the influence of emotions on a person’s healing—knowledge that was subsequently used by physicians to treat the ‘motions of the soul’ of patients outside the army.
These links do not necessarily make citizens and soldiers into members of one coherent emotional community as defined by Rosenwein, sharing the same appraisals of good and evil, and having the same ideas about emotions, affective bonds, and modes of expression that should be encouraged or rejected. In other places, moreover, the military may not have been integrated into the civic public sphere in a similar way that early on. Nevertheless, the Dutch examples mentioned here caution us not to assume that military emotional communities in Europe were socially isolated from other social networks. If we want to study the armed forces as emotional communities, we should take the manifold exchanges between the men-at-arms and citizens into account.\textsuperscript{16}

**Blind Spots**

Emotional communities and the relationship between the military and citizenry are issues that could be more seriously examined in future research on early modern military emotions, but they were not entirely overlooked in this collection of essays. Still, like every other academic project this book too does have its blind spots and in this final section I should like to address two of them.

One such unmarked issue that is accepted all too easily as something natural not in need of any discussion, is the presence and influence of masculinity as a standard for military emotions.\textsuperscript{17} Presumed rather than articulated, the near-absence of the term in this volume is striking. Yet, notions of masculinity clearly played a role in military emotional cultures and military emotional communities, and thus in the experience of battlefield emotions. One does not have to be a historian of gender to see that the stoic warrior, the loyal comrade, the fatherly captain, the chivalric officer, and the virtuous commander were all ideal types of masculinity, and as such emulated by men in the military. Acknowledging this, however, is not enough. We should start analyzing how for different groups within the armed forces the rhetoric and vocabulary of masculinity changed over time, and how this influenced their self-perceptions, combat motivations, and experiences as military. In many ways, the notion of military manhood may strike us as rather fixed and therefore self-explanatory, but it was not fixed in all respects. The elements of masculinity that were called upon (or rejected) to construct, perform and identify the military self, varied from context to context.\textsuperscript{18}
In a similar way the age-old archetypes mentioned above may have inspired the authors, artists and politicians discussed in this book, but each selected and adjusted the models for his own purposes: thus pious commanders were transformed into brilliant generals, and ordinary foot-soldiers reshaped into patriotic citizen-soldiers. The enemy changed form accordingly. What we have to realise is that the underlying notions of military masculinity were quite different and their deployment to legitimise conflict or consolidate existing power relations—in and outside the army—as diverse. This deserves more serious study than offered in this volume. Masculinity is not merely a biological category but a cultural category as well. Its versatile discourse is relevant for the meanings ascribed to military emotional experiences in the past—by the military itself and by others.19

This brings me to a second near-absence in this volume, that is, a discussion of the way in which battles transform men into killers by evoking emotions that in other contexts would be considered abject. In the previous chapters early modern battlefields were mostly conceived as sites which—in reality or in imagination—created heroes and victims, a perspective which tends to highlight courage, comradeship, fear and suffering as the accompanying key emotions. Much less discussed, however, were the more ugly emotions such as hatred, vengefulness, rage, the thirst for blood, the rapture of killing, the greed for riches—needed perhaps for satisfactory combat performances but also leading to the wild chase of fleeing adversaries, the rape of conquered cities, and the mutilation of dead enemies' bodies. Is it our modern, civilised perspective that prevents us from poring over these more aggressive and darker emotions? We know they are not absent from the sources—Sandberg's chapter on siege narratives proves differently and a couple of other authors in Battlefield Emotions also touch upon these emotions in the passing when they cite contemporary sources.20 So far, however, this book has only scraped the surface of those and other morally problematic battlefield emotions.

I believe we still have some serious thinking to do about the implications of what might not be entirely blind spots here but definitely dark spots in need of further illumination. When we as academics are neglecting these darker emotions, are we unconsciously sanitising the experiences of (early modern) battlefields? When we as academics remain inarticulate about the gendering of military experiences, are we consenting to a vague and rather indeterminate notion of manliness as natural standard for the military, in the past as well as the future? The history of warfare has a great potential for historical research into emotions but if we wish to give the field a decisive sweep in this new direction, we should start thinking about these issues.
NOTES

3. In this article I generally use the word ‘emotion’ in the familiar broad sense of the word, that is, emotion as a catch-all term for all kinds of affective phenomena, not only emotions in the strict psychological sense of the word but also feelings, moods, passions, and sentiments. See for this broader use of the term Nico H. Frijda, *The Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
5. If it is anything to go by: of the handful of papers presented by young military historians at the conference of the International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies in Rotterdam in July 2015, one third had emotions as topic.
7. This trend is shown at its clearest when one follows the changes in one particular battlefield story over several centuries as Kati Parppe did in her paper ‘Heroic tears: 15th–19th-century Russian narratives of the Battle of Kulikovo (1380),’ presented at the international workshop *Battlefield Emotions, 1550–1850*, Ghent University, 13–15 February 2014. On the changing imagery concerning this battle, see Parppe’s book, *The First National Effort? The Battle of Kulikovo Refought* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).


15. Rudolf M. Dekker and Lotte C. van de Pol were among the first to draw attention to these female soldiers in their The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).


This volume explores changes in emotional cultures of the early modern battlefield. Military action involves extraordinary modes of emotional experience and affective control of the soldier, and it evokes strong emotional reactions in society at large. While emotional experiences of actors and observers may differ radically, they can also be tightly connected through social interaction, cultural representations and mediatization. This collection of essays integrates psychological, social and cultural perspectives on the battlefield, looking at emotional behaviour, expression and representation in a great variety of primary source material. In three steps it discusses the emotional practices in the army, the emotional experiences of the individual combatant and the emotions of the mediated battlefield in the visual arts.

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