
Reviewed by Michiel de Weger

*Gendarmes and the State* is a classic – mandatory reading for anyone interested in the history of the modern military —, and the editors of *Res Militaris* may rightly hesitate about which section of the journal is best suited for the present review of a volume published twelve years ago.

What is often forgotten is that large parts of post-Napoleonic military institutions were never primarily meant for war, but to pacify their own territories. This is the focus of Emsley’s easy-to-read and unpretentious, but detailed, well-documented and illustrated study of the introduction into continental Europe of police forces with military status: *gendarmerie*. In the nineteenth century, police forces barely existed, at least on the scale they assume today; at that time, the military had to face the same kind of security threats they now have to counter in ‘peace support operations’: maintaining and restoring public order. The book is an ideal starting point to reflect on and discuss today’s military operations and the force composition needed for them.

The author’s aim, as he indicates in his introduction (pp.5-6), was to bring together secondary material and add some primary research to explore the development of gendarmerie-style policing across nineteenth-century Europe. He set out to find answers to the twin questions of why that kind of policing was so attractive to governments, and how the basic model was shaped to fit in in various countries. Emsley further wanted to know what roles were assigned to them and whether they were effective at fulfilling them, how their roles changed and developed over time, and what impact they had on the communities they served as well as on the States that deployed them. The answer to the last question makes the book even more relevant for today’s military missions to ‘stabilise and reconstruct’ countries like Iraq and Afghanistan.

Anxious to provide historical depth, Emsley starts (pp.13-14) by describing the roots of the gendarmerie in Philippe Auguste’s resort to *sergents* and supporting legal officers as he embarked on the third crusade in 1190. Over the next 300 years or so, a system developed by which commanders of the royal army appointed officers – marshals or *maréchaux* – to supervise and administer justice in the army. As the French army expanded, the marshals created companies of soldiers to assist them. In the sixteenth century the *maréchaussée* acquired jurisdiction over civilians, too. These soldiers-of-the-law were tasked to counter highway robbery, poaching, sacrilege, smuggling, murder, rape and arson. In 1670, burglary and popular disorder were added, as was supervision of transport on both roads and waterways at the turn of the next century. Emsley devotes his third chapter to the role of the gendarmerie in the French Revolution. Although the importance of that event for the development of western or modern societies was profound,
the Napoleonic era that followed had greater impact on the development of the
gendarmerie and, indeed, of the military as a whole.

Emsley devotes only 21 of the book’s 288 pages to that period, but as one reads the
book again the impression strengthens that it actually is the heart of the author’s argument.
Looking into the Emperor’s correspondence, he found that Napoleon’s letters are sprinkled
with frequent laudatory reference to the Gendarmerie – as the Maréchaussée was now
called. He even wrote to a regional director of the civilian police, which had come into
existence by then, that he owed the restoration of order in France to its military counterpart
(p.56). Moreover, the gendarmerie proved an important tool in the territories Napoleon
occupied throughout continental Europe. The model was imposed on subject peoples and
their leaders, but it was also adopted by allies and enemies who perceived it as being
effective and adaptable to their own circumstances.

Only four months after his coup d’État, Napoleon started to reorganize the
Gendarmerie. A description of the force it was shaped into makes clear that its role was not
only to pacify the country(side), but also that it served to develop the State and society as a
whole. Its top leadership swept through the force dismissing the old and infirm, the useless
and the drunkards, changing the postings of others as a means of punishment and assessing
the most sensible places for locating stations, or ‘brigades’. In Paris, an elaborate central
command staff organization was created. The ideal gendarme was a tall, courageous
military veteran, honest, moral, sober, able to read and write, and a man who stood apart
from the local population. He had to sacrifice personally on behalf of his fellow citizens
and, above all, the interests of the State (pp.58-59).

Many of the regions under French control were infested with remaining royalist
rebels, and gangs of robbers; rioting was sometimes part of the scene. The similarities with
the security situation in today’s Iraq and (cities in) Afghanistan are striking. The
Gendarmerie was the principal instrument to counter these in the 1800’s. It was also
responsible for two crucial elements of the new military personnel system Napoleon
introduced – one that revolutionized armed forces around Europe: enforcing
conscription legislation and chasing deserters in towns, villages and throughout
the countryside. Conscription was, as is widely recognised, a major factor in the development and
unification of the nation-States of Western Europe.

As Emsley writes (p.71), the appearance of gendarmes in a district could generate
serious disorder, in which the mayors often displayed greater sympathy for their
neighbours than for the State the visitors represented. In more general terms, gendarmes
were often met with violence, including lethal, and Emsley provides examples. But fights,
gun-battles and riots were not the experience of gendarmes every day. A peaceful patrol or
escort, watching for suspects, collecting local intelligence, getting mayors to sign the patrol
book was more common and became the norm increasingly towards the end of Napoleon’s
reign.

When the reader reaches the conclusion of the book’s seventh chapter (pp.145-146), what the organization had meant for the French State and population by the end of
the nineteenth century becomes clear. Over that century, it had won its share of battle honour, but the best part of its work had been to patrol their districts seeking to maintain peace and good order, both as dictated by their political masters and as expected by the population. Gendarmes enforced equality before the law, as promised by the French Revolution, and ensured a life free from crime and disorder. It brought the State to the provinces. In towns, villages, and on the roads they represented the law of the State, but were accepted by the citizens to replace more traditional forms of justice and community assistance.

Beyond that point, the author describes how the gendarmerie model spread to other countries – to Spain, Italy, Austria-Hungary, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, parts of present-day Germany, even Russia and Ireland. He concludes that these forces significantly contributed to the modernization of the European countryside: to its integration into the wider world of nation-States or multinational empires. Gendarmes helped increase the whittling-away of the old relationship between feudal masters and peasants, in many countries replacing it with the Rechtsstaat (pp.252-254) that would prove so important to social and economic development in continental Europe during the nineteenth century and beyond.

What makes Emsley’s book even more interesting is that it leads to some very fundamental reflections on the functioning and force composition of today’s Western military organizations. As the examples of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan show – e.g. Hedges and Al-Arian’s penetrating tactical-level study\(^1\) of the handling of checkpoints, convoys, house searches and detention – Western militaries, especially of the Anglo-Saxon type, are ill-prepared to pacify countries after ‘real war’ has ended. As Perito (2004) so forcefully demonstrates, the United States (and other countries) lack ‘constabulary forces’ to establish and maintain basic law and order, leaving this task to soldiers and marines who have just about no skills, equipment, experience and desire for it. Perito\(^2\) sees the continental European gendarmerie forces as the best examples of the kind of organization needed for this task. As countering or preventing general lawlessness is one of the largest tasks of Western military forces in the post-Cold War era, following Perito’s argument, constabulary forces should form a large part of today’s military – as indeed they were back in the nineteenth century.

Whether Perito is right remains open for discussion, however. It is questionable whether existing gendarmerie forces are up to what is needed in places like Baghdad, Basra, Kabul and Kandahar. Of the eighty or more countries that maintain, or have recently created, gendarmerie forces,\(^3\) only a limited number have domestic experiences that are comparable to the threatening situation in Iraq and Afghanistan. Most of the countries

---

Emsley discusses, like France and the Netherlands, have been pacified for so long that sending soldiers or marines seems just about as logical and risky as sending gendarmes. The Turkish Jandarma, the Brazilian Policia Militar or the Chinese People’s Armed Police might be better suited. Their work in Kurdish areas, the favelas of Rio de Janeiro and deep in the Amazon jungle, Tibet and Xinjiang might come closer to Emsley’s description of the work of gendarmes in continental Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Michiel de Weger
Netherlands Defence Academy, Breda
mj.d.weger@nlda.nl