

Barracks in Europe

The barracking of European populations since the eighteenth century

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ABSTRACT

Since the eighteenth century, barracks have separated the civilian from the military space with increasing clarity. This process of barracking, which was particularly pronounced in late nineteenth-century Europe, was marked by the gradual exclusion of civilian populations, as well as the strengthening of disciplinary procedures within barracks. The uniquely European practice of barracking resulted from a number of elements, including the bolstering of state influence, affirmation of national cultures, and imposition of a triumphant virility. The abandonment of compulsory military service during the second half of the twentieth century accompanied the gradual but hardly inevitable decline of the unifying and disciplinary role played by European barracks.



Marius Roy, *The Poor in Paris*, 1886, Musée de Beaux-Arts de Rennes. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The regalian nucleus of political organizations consisted of sites—strongholds, camps, citadels, garrisons, and fortresses—that concentrated military life, from Greek city-states with garrisons to Roman *limes* and medieval *incastellamento*. Early modern Europe, which was marked by a “military revolution” (Geoffrey Parker), nevertheless represented a break, by requiring the creation of permanent armies with larger troop numbers, as opposed to the model of mercenary soldiers or temporary levies among vassals and militias. This break led to an increase in strongholds along the borders of European states based on the Vauban’s (1633-1707) “iron belt”

model, or the fortifications imagined by Menno Van Coehoorn (1641-1704) in the United Provinces in the late seventeenth century. The need to station troops in times of peace gradually challenged the system of quartering in private homes—considered a difficult burden at the time, with some being exempt via privileges and taxes—and convinced states to diffuse the barrack model. In 1763, the duc de Choiseul (1719-1785), head of Louis XV's government, chose to station cavalry regiments in barracks built on the model of the Saumur cavalry school.

At the same time, barracks became disciplinary spaces devoted to training soldiers based on the drilling model promoted by Frederick II of Prussia (1712-1786). The greater attention to military instruction during the second half of the eighteenth century redefined barracks as a closed space, whose architecture was designed to ensure surveillance and discipline over the corps. This disciplinary project described by Michel Foucault—of which barracks were only one manifestation—should not be confused with the social realities of military life. Barracks were not separated from urban society, and soldiers still lived there with their families, making discipline more difficult. In France, only the regiments of the Garde royale required soldiers to be confined, as the majority of troops were still quartered in private homes. In the Piedmont army the families of soldiers lived in the barracks, which were not separated from the urban environment by any physical or symbolic barrier.

The construction of barracks as *heterotopes* (other place), marked by the exclusion of civilian populations and the confinement of soldiers, grew out of a long process culminating in the late nineteenth century. The gradual exclusion of women from military life after the French Revolution was no doubt a major characteristic of this process. Despite the fact that women played a crucial role in European armies during the eighteenth century, performing functions as sutlers, partners, spouses, and mothers, they were gradually excluded from barracks, and limited to roles defined by the military institution. Barracks thus contributed to the regulation of brothels in Europe, in an effort to combat the venereal diseases blamed on women. In Great Britain, the *Contagious Diseases Acts* passed in 1860 initially sought to protect military garrisons. In France, military households—when they were authorized—moved beyond the walls of barracks in the nineteenth century. Spouses, whose dowry was controlled, lived in garrison cities, while the children of soldiers attended specialized institutions outside of regiments beginning in the 1870s. It was therefore not just sutlers and washerwomen who were ultimately excluded from these spaces during the 1900s.

This exclusion of civilian populations was accompanied by the greater disciplinary control exerted over soldiers. Barracks shared the same technical characteristics of control and surveillance present in other disciplinary institutions (prisons, asylums, hospices): identification through troop registers, ritualized gestures in instruction, system of tests and training (often reserved for the nobility), regular calls to combat desertion, and a system of punishments/rewards based on free circulation. This disciplinary grip was further tightened by an increasingly complex hierarchy, which saw the emergence of a growing number of ranks, as well as jobs reserved for middle managers (sergeant majors, sub-lieutenants, non-commissioned officers) specializing in the surveillance and training of troops. After 1815, the social order of barracks was still marked by the preferential recruitment of officers among conservative and liberal social elites. Troops (soldiers and non-commissioned officers) largely consisted of working class men who had no way of avoiding military obligations. These social differences further reinforced the sometimes-brutal grip of military discipline, which was exerted on men who were often considered as simple servants by their officers.

This social and disciplinary order was not challenged by the almost universal adoption of compulsory military service in Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century. However, the universal conscription model invented by the French Revolution (Jourdan Delbrel law of 1798), which was used by Prussia (1814), introduced a new dimension for barracks. These disciplinary spaces were henceforth given the political mission of imposing state authority and helping diffuse a national or imperial culture, such as the Austro-Hungarian conscripts united beneath the flags of the *Gemeinsame Armee* (Common Army). In countries that adopted compulsory military service, barracks were also presented as places for learning the hegemonic military-virile model of masculinity.

As instruments of political and cultural unification on a national or imperial scale, barracks were part of ideological projects that differed markedly from country to country. In France, barracks had to produce abstract citizen-soldiers against the centralized backdrop of the nation state. In Germany and Italy, its promoters emphasized national unity through the mixing of men. However, barring a few exceptions, barracks were conceived in Europe as instruments of state control, in the same manner as taxation and obedience to law enforcement. Refusal to be barracked (absence without leave, desertion) thus emerges as a marker of a population's nationalization, which was strong in France but much weaker in some Spanish provinces such as Galicia, where the refusal of military service—which was based on the drawing of lots—was massive in the late nineteenth century. Only British barracks, which were not part of the European barracking movement, developed their originality through local recruitment of voluntary enlistees and the organization of family life within regiments.

After 1945, the division of Europe and the doctrine of nuclear deterrence made the posting of large numbers of troops less necessary, thereby helping to diminish the legitimacy of barracks. The increasingly large disjunction between the ideological justification for barracks and the absence of any tactical necessity for them led to a collective loss of interest, as well as the system's abandonment in most European countries. For all that, the abandonment of the barrack system did not betoken its total disappearance, as barracks are still used to support virile and national projects for unification sparked by fears of military confrontation—as in Ukraine and Russia—or are praised as tools for social cohesion that provide a renewed sense of authority, solidarity, and national values for supposedly disaffected youth.

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