Early modern authors of military memoirs rarely commented upon their emotional involvement with combat or suffering. Their reports are usually very factual and in many cases do not even mention their own experiences. According to historians like Yuval Harari this changed from the late 18th century onwards, when soldiers started to describe their battlefield experiences as revelatory, unique experiences that change the self. In art and literature the focus similarly switched from heroic facts to individual emotions; even heroes had to be seen to be human, and reveal their inner experience of war.

The eighteenth-century culture of sensibility and the ‘humanization’ of the image of the common soldier in cultural and political discourse indeed had a major impact on the manner in which military matters were discussed in the public sphere. It created a new common language about the experience of combat and introduced intimate images of the battlefield, a process that may have bridged the gap between civic and military imaginings of combat. These images and stories enabled the public to imagine what an individual soldier experienced in military combat and what it was like to kill and suffer in the name of the nation. According to Mary A. Favret these images also created a certain distance towards war experiences, since the battlefield itself is removed from immediate perception, and only available to the public through media forms.

In the military sciences, too, there was an increasing awareness that common soldiers were not machines but feeling bodies with emotions. From the eighteenth century onwards, it went hand in hand with ‘modernization’ of the military, the introduction of military service and with the rise of military education. While military theorists propagated a rationalisation of military organisation, they also became aware of the importance of morale and motivation for the individual soldier, irrespective of their rank. Empathy and enthusiasm were important notions in military theory of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which placed the emotions of the armed individual, rather than his commanders’ sublime reason, at the centre of war strategy.

But when and where can this growing interest for emotions first be observed? And how can we explain this? Should we explain the absence of individual emotions in early modern memoirs, poems and theatre texts about combat, with reference to concepts of the self and the body, to religious beliefs or to the conventions of genre? Are these emotions the creation of rising states and nationalism? Should we look for explanations in medical sciences, in the organization of the military, in military theory and strategy or rather in developments in the arts themselves? This interdisciplinary workshop will not only study the emotions associated with combat experience as expressed in all possible media and social spheres, and chart the changes that can be observed over time. It will also try to shed light on the social and cultural developments that brought these changes about.

*Battlefield Emotions 1500-1900* is organized by: Amsterdam Centre for Cross-Disciplinary Emotion and Sensory Studies (ACCESS), Group for Early Modern Studies Ghent University (GEMS), History Department Leiden University; Coordination: Erika Kuijpers (Leiden University) and Cornelis van der Haven (Ghent University)
Friday, 18 January 2013, Amsterdam (VU Amsterdam)

PROGRAMME

Chair: Erika Kuijpers (Leiden University, the Netherlands)

10.00 h. Welcome by Jürgen Pieters (Ghent University, Belgium)

10.20 h. Introduction by Cornelis van der Haven (Ghent University, Belgium)

10.40 h. Keynote Lecture by Mary. A. Favret (Indiana University, USA)
Fallen Bodies: Considering Soldiers and Suicides c.1800

11.20 h. Discussion

11.40 h. Coffee

11.50 h. Richard Smith (Goldsmiths University of London, UK)
A "considerably larger emotional capacity than the English": Changing representations of the West Indian soldier's character and sensibilities from the French Revolution to the First World War

12.20 h. Discussion

12.40 h. Lunch break

13.40 h. David Lederer (NUI Maynooth, Ireland)
Where is the battlefield? The Ubiquity of Fear during the Thirty Years War

14.10 h. Lisa de Boer (Westmont College, USA)
The Sidelong Glance: Tracing ‘Battlefield Emotions’ in Dutch Art of the Golden Age

14.40 h. Discussion

15.30 Tea/Coffee

15.50 h. Mareen van Marwyck (Frankfurt am Main, Germany)
“Love Wars”: The Sentimentalization of Violence in Early 19th Century German Literature

16.20 h. Discussion

16.40 h. Conclusions by Dorothee Sturkenboom (Independent Scholar)

17.00 h. Drinks

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Abstracts

Mary A. Favret (Indiana University, USA)
Fallen Bodies: Considering Soldiers and Suicides c.1800.

This paper brings together two images that ethical philosophy and military psychology have tried earnestly to keep apart: the soldier and the suicide. After reviewing the ethical and aesthetic discourse, the paper offers a survey of British paintings of fallen men, and concludes with a comparison of a heroic portrait by Benjamin West (1798) and a Pre-Raphaelite pairing of a suicidal poet (1860). At stake in this survey and comparison are questions of agency – who injures and who is injured – but also the representation of inner wounds, invisible to the eye. These paintings make visible what official discourse occludes: that the killing of others can be traumatic to the solider.

Richard Smith (Goldsmiths University of London, UK)
A "considerably larger emotional capacity than the English": changing representations of the West Indian soldier's character and sensibilities from the French Revolution to the First World War

Throughout the nineteenth century, black West Indian and African soldiers provided a vital strategic presence in the British imperial forces. For the champions of Empire, the presence of black troops symbolised the success of the imperial project, particularly the efficacy of the civilising mission. However, black soldiers also provided a focus around which race and gender anxieties, expressed through concerns about physical performance, mental and emotional capacity and martial efficiency, were expressed. The body and character of the black soldier often served as the site upon which concerns about white masculinity and sexuality were projected or mapped.

Black West Indian and African troops served with distinction in many campaigns from the French Revolutionary wars to the ‘scramble for Africa’ By the last quarter of the nineteenth century some commentators argued that black soldiers were more reliable than white soldiers, particularly in settings which demanded stamina and separation from the comforts of “civilisation”. Potential white recruits were regarded as too soft or feminised by the increasing availability of luxury goods, often imperial produce, to cope with the rigours of military life. Equally, industrialisation and urban squalor resulted in declining physical fitness and stature during key imperial crises, such as the South African War (1899-1902). In contrast, black soldiers could be viewed as a revitalising masculine ingredient whose apparent proximity to nature and uncomplicated emotional character made them ideal soldiers, particularly on the imperial frontier.

By the First World War, when over twelve thousand men were recruited from the British West Indian territories, attitudes towards the emotional character of the black soldier was increasingly ambiguous and complex. On one hand they could be represented as childlike or
Effeminate with a purported predisposition towards neurosis and an inability to deal with the complex mental and technical demands of modern warfare. Simultaneously, black West Indian soldiers became a repository for the repressed emotions demanded by late nineteenth and early twentieth century military and civil life. They were regarded as natural entertainers; singers and dancers duty-bound to keep the spirits and morale of white British soldiers intact. In some settings they became objects of homoerotic longing for an intact male body, unscarred by industrial warfare. Finally, as imperial hegemony wavered, stereotypes of the black soldier as undisciplined and of a combustible emotional temperament were rearticulated, resurrecting white fears of black insurrection and revolt that had never been far from the surface since the earliest days of plantation slavery.

David Lederer (NUI Maynooth, Ireland)

Where is the battlefield? The Ubiquity of Fear during the Thirty Years War

In his recent monumental study of the Thirty Years War, Peter Wilson suggests that seventeenth century autobiographers “… generally lack the reflections on events, descriptions of emotions or psychological insights that can be found in some sixteenth-century works and which become more common with those written after the 1770s”. His suggestion is that the record of emotional states may not follow any strict teleological progression, thereby calling notions of modernity into question. The long-standing discussion surrounding the usage of ego-documents / Selbstzeugnisse as autobiographic sources on the experience of the war among ordinary participants has, however, indicated that one emotion is clearly overrepresented: fear. A hypercognized (Reddy) sense of loss and suffering certainly provided fruitful conditions for the multiplication of fear responses to the brutal events of the war. Significantly, this was more than a universal biological response (flight or fight) to wartime privations. Nagging anxiety and fear were omnipresent, at all levels of society, rendering the boundaries of battlefield emotions difficult to define. During Europe’s first “total war”, consciously compared by Churchill to the period 1918-1945, both soldiers and civilians found themselves on the field of battle to an extent never before witnessed. Nonetheless, rather than universal expressions of wartime Angst, quotidian fears had to be expressed within the context of contemporary definitions as fear responses to peculiar historic events and conjunctures, so that we need to locate the psychological state of the battlefield environment within larger cultural constraints, expressions and emotives. This paper roams among a wide variety of sources, from personal accounts, broadsheets, ballads and the picaresque novel in order to isolate a state of fear specific to the events of 1618-1648, while still rendering it translatable for comparative analysis with other places and times.
Lisa J. DeBoer (Westmont College, Santa Barbara, CA)

The Sidelong Glance: Tracing ‘Battlefield Emotions’ in Dutch Art of the Golden Age

Though popular perceptions of Dutch 17th century art lean decidedly toward the domestic, one does not need to look long or far to find abundant evidence of military themes and images. The very ubiquity of these images suggests something about early modern Dutch culture that is not often discussed, a deep and underlying militarism. Some of these images are explicitly ‘battlefield images.’ Others less obviously so. Few could be seen as direct representations of soldiers’ ‘battlefield emotions.’ By attending, however, to the complex position of ‘the soldier’ in Dutch society, and to the interplay between subject and genre, we may draw some tentative conclusions about how these martial images imagine the emotional life of the military man. While our emphasis will be on what historians of emotion refer to as emotional standards, that is, ‘the ‘feeling rules’ or emotionology that describes socially prescribed emotional values” (Stearns, 2008), the underlying social dynamic at work in this body of imagery may reveal some of the historical and cultural developments that make later representations of first-hand ‘battlefield emotions’ possible.

Mareen van Marwyck (Frankfurt am Main, Germany)

“Love Wars”. The Sentimentalization of Violence in Early 19th Century German Literature

With the concept of grace in 18th century aesthetic and moral theory a category emerges that allows to stage violence as both ethically legitimate and extremely beautiful. The spectator is thereby afforded an affirmative, even loving reception of the hero(ines’) violent acts and, by extension, a full identification with them. At the same time, graceful warriors are constructed as subjects who themselves do their duties lovingly, without being forced and with full harmony of will and nature. In Kleist’s Penthesilea, Werner’s Wanda and Caroline de la Motte Fouqué’s Das Heldenmädchen aus der Vendée, love is not only the aim or trophy of battle, but it is itself expressed and performed in the fights – love has become a genuine battlefield emotion. Also in the poetry of the Wars of Liberation (1813 - 1815), love plays an important role in the emotional self---description of the soldier: as the worthiest aim to fight for, as love for the nation, or even in the rejection of erotic love in favor of the emotional experience of combat, which is perceived as even transcending the intensity of love. In my presentation I will examine the function of this sentimentalization of war in the context of rising nationalism and the proliferation of war theories during the early 19th century. Secondly, I am going to explore the correlation between the conceptualization of love as a battlefield emotion and the sentimentalization of the family as the heart of bourgeois ideology in 18th century literature and arts. What are the cultural implications of transferring the epitome of the private – the bourgeois feminine and the concept of romantic love – to the sphere of warfare? My presentation will discuss these questions by analyzing the aforementioned literary texts and by bringing them into contact with pertinent military research.