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Citizenship, Military Families, and the Creation of a New Definition of “Deserving Poor” in Britain, 1793–1815

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Abstract

This article argues that during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, 1793 to 1815, the British national government created and implemented a new, gendered, and national social citizenship-based definition of “deserving poor” as part of its innovative new welfare system for the families of common soldiers and seamen. Under this definition, women and children lost the agency they had under the centuries-old local poor relief system, which distributed assistance to all persons in need based on their own circumstances. The national welfare system for military families gave women and children access to pioneering programs, but only if they were related to a man who had served the nation well by fighting in Britain's military. Profoundly familialist, the new welfare system marked the British national government's first broad-scale attempt to care for the families of the rank and file and, by extension, poor women and children. However, under this system, eligibility ultimately rested in the bodies of men.

The claim of the children before us is, indeed, no common claim; it is not merely the plea of distress, how strong so ever that may sometimes be. No, they take a higher ground, they are the children of those brave men who have fought the battles of their country, and upheld England's glory in many a well-contested field; they come with their fathers' services in their hands, and ask protection from the country in which their valour was preserved.

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