Talking Points

European Warfare 1494-1660 and the Military Revolution

In providing an introduction to the historiography, Jeremy Black warns against a simplistic characterisation of a complex and diverse period.

The 'Military Revolution' has enjoyed a good innings, and, like many other theories, is valuable for encouraging debate and for serving as an analytical device. However, the concept also has its limitations, not least because it threatens to distract attention from one of the most important developments in recent work: a focus on changes not in the core areas (Spanish empire, Italy, Low Countries) and armies (Spain, Sweden) of the period but, instead, in other areas, particularly the British Isles and Eastern Europe. This is important because these areas are, in large part, approached in recent work not simply in terms of the diffusion of the Military Revolution but rather with reference to the autonomy and vitality of their developments.

New Approaches
It is often argued now that developments in Eastern Europe in large part responded to the pressures of conflict with non-European powers.

Relief of the Last Siege of Vienna by an unknown artist: the painting depicts the arrival of John Sobieski of Poland at the head of a relief army on 12 September 1683. After this, the Turkish army was soon dispersed. The campaign was the last in which the Ottomans tried to invade Western Europe.

Indeed Thomas Allsen has recently suggested that 'those states and cultures with a lengthy history of interaction with the nomads, who for so long lived under the threat and the spell of an earlier "cavalry revolution", were the more ... hesitant to join the "gunpowder revolution", while those peoples on the extreme periphery of Eurasia ... whose contact with the nomads was restricted and intermittent, were the more eager to interrogate and exploit its possibilities' (T.T. Allsen, 'The Circulation of Military Technology in the Mongolian Empire', in N. Di Cosmo ed., Warfare in Inner Asian History, 500-1800, Leiden: Brill, 2002, p. 286). This idea has considerable potential for our
assessment of Western Europe, Japan and South-Eastern Asia. Environment clearly plays a role: for example, the forested regions of South-Eastern Asia and South India were not suitable for cavalry. An emphasis on European reactions to outsiders would encourage attention to the Habsburg responses to the Ottomans, particularly focusing on the 1593-1606 conflict. Similarly, it is worth considering how far cavalry tactics in the Thirty Years' War were influenced by the Polish experience of fighting the Ottomans.

The emphasis on responses to threats (and to natural environments) is instructive, not least because it redirects our attention from the Europeans considered simply (and often triumphantly) as a leading edge acting on the protean mass of others, towards an emphasis on tasking, or strategic, cultures. This emphasis allows for a variety of commitments and a multiplicity of responses without having to assume that any one is necessarily more advanced. Thus, there are specific chapters on Russian (Brian Davies), Baltic (Knud Jespersen) and Gaelic (J. Michael Hill) warfare in J.M. Black ed., European Warfare 1453-1815 (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999). They underline the limitations of the paradigmatic/diffusionist model, as does Gervase Phillips' The Anglo-Scots Wars 1513-1550 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1999), a book that is more wide-ranging than its title suggests, not least with the emphasis in his opening chapter on adaptation, rather than revolution, and on the continued importance of cavalry. The latter is even more apparent if due weight is devoted to Eastern European warfare, but, excluding that, was also central to Western European operations and battles (for example Rocroi, 1643, and Naseby, 1645). This contributed to the combined-arms character of campaigns and battles, and thus to the need for commanders able to co-ordinate forces successfully.

The Technology of War

Phillips also argues that most of the innovations attributed to the Italian Wars (1494-1559) and to Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden (r. 1611-32) had been anticipated in the fifteenth century, particularly by the Burgundians, a thesis that reminds us of the need in any assessment of the Military Revolution to consider it in the

'The Capture of Parma' by Jacobo Tintoretto. Parma, which had been captured by Francis I in 1515, was won back four years later by the imperial offensive depicted here.
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guide their tactical use: effectiveness was seen to depend on volume of fire, not individual accuracy, and therefore musketeers were grouped together, creating acute problems of vulnerability: their rate of fire was too low to provide protection from attacking cavalry or pikemen. The advantage of gunpowder weaponry rested initially in large part not on the specifications of the firearms, but on their ease of use. They were relatively inexpensive and, more significantly, required less training than longbows. The need for training was further lessened by the characteristics of the weapon and its use for volume fire rather than single-shot accuracy. Tactics, training and technology dynamically interacted.

It is necessary not to exaggerate what could be achieved by new weaponry and methods, not least because of the ability of other powers to match or counter developments. Thus, the growing effectiveness of siege artillery was countered by developments in fortifications, which greatly increased the time and resources required in mounting successful sieges. At the same time, it became advisable to have armies in the field in order to challenge any besiegers. Both this, and the cost of new fortifications, made effective kings important as providers of protection. Yet caution is necessary before anticipating modern policies and pushing forward the development of modern state forms. Alongside an emphasis on battle and siege in 'functional' terms, as stages in the defeat of opposing forces, it is necessary to adopt a broader approach to victory and to underline the extent to which success had a symbolic value. From this perspective, decisiveness has to be reconceptualised, away from an emphasis on total victory, understood in modern terms as the destruction of opposing armies and the capture of their territory, and towards a notion that may have more meaning in terms of the values of the period. This would present conflict as a struggle of will and for prestige, the ends sought being, first, a retention of domestic and international backing that rested on the gaining of 'glorie' and, second, persuading other rulers to accept a new configuration of relative 'glorie'. To argue that this led to 'non-rational' strategies, such as the concentration of forces on sieges made important only by the presence of the king as commander, is to misunderstand the rationality of the states of the period.

The Resources of War

If Spain in the sixteenth century and the United Provinces in the seventeenth were well advanced in the field of international finance, and able to finance their activities, in part, through a well-developed international credit network, it was not until after the mid-seventeenth century that the growing role of the European state gradually replaced the semi-independent military entrepreneurs of early days. David Parrott's study of Richelieu's Army: War, Government and Society in France, 1624-1642 (Cambridge, 2001) has underlined the continued role of such entrepreneurs, as well as of a command culture of clientage. The same was true of other armies, such as the Austrian army. The career of Wallenstein, the great Austrian military entrepreneur of the 1620s and early 1630s, was the apogee of a far more widespread practice and culture of military mobilisation and command.

More generally, in the conflict of the period, most spectacularly but not only the Thirty Years' War (1618-48), supply difficulties, and their consequences in the shape of high rates of desertion, led generals to campaign in areas whence they could obtain substantial enforced contributions, which scarcely accords with the thesis of a military revolution as a major accomplishment of, and tool for, state policy. However, it is important to note that the responses of later societies to the problems of war finance, particularly inflation and penal taxation in the twentieth
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century, were also damaging. Moreover, contributions accorded with the limitations of early-modern government, with the wish to make opposing areas pay for war and thus to reduce their military capacity and undermine their will, and also with the opportunities created by campaigning.

Nevertheless, the course of campaigning at the close of the period suggests that persistent resource problems outweighed any improvements in logistical and organisational capability. Indeed, military change contributed substantially to this problem. As the cumulative firepower of European forces rose greatly both on land and at sea, so the burden of supply rose. Armies could not support themselves in the field when it came to munitions. Compared to the nineteenth century, when steam power was applied to land and sea transport, the transport capability of the period posed a central problem for strategic planning and execution. Much of the focus in accounting for developments in army size should be on the second half of the century, rather than on the Thirty Years' War.

The Wider World

This emphasis on limitations may appear surprising given the European overseas conquests of this period, but these have to be put in perspective. First, there were also other important conquerors, including the Manchu, Mughals, Safavids and Ottomans, as well as Morocco and Oman (see J. Black ed., War in the Early Modern World 1450-1815, London: Routledge, 1999). Whereas no European power was able to conquer much of Europe in the first six decades of the seventeenth century, the Manchu overran China and Korea and defeated Mongol opponents. The Ottoman conquest of the Mamluk empire of Syria, Palestine and Egypt in 1516-17 readily compared to Spanish success against the Aztecs.

Secondly, like non-European conquerors, Europeans often failed, sometimes spectacularly so, as with the Portuguese in Morocco in 1578, when King Sebastian and his invading army were destroyed at Alcázarquivir. More generally, the Europeans were far more successful in what became Latin America and in Siberia than they were in Africa or South Asia.

Thirdly, the Ottoman advances of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Europe, not least the conquest of Hungary in the 1520s and 1530s, suggested to contemporaries that European methods of waging war were not necessarily more effective. The Hungarian defeat at Mohacs in 1526 was the latest in a sequence of spectacular Ottoman victories in the Balkans. There was no comparable Christian victory on land until Vienna in 1683. Defensive successes could not compare to Mohacs, which led to a significant geopolitical shift in Europe, some of the consequences of which have shaped modern European history. Mohacs was the most important battle in Europe in the period, which serves as a reminder of the marginality of some of the Military Revolution discussion.

However, in long-range naval capability, the Europeans did develop an important relative advantage (J. Glete, Warfare at Sea, 1500-1665: Maritime conflicts and the transformation of Europe, London: Routledge, 2000). This owed much to the ability of governments to cooperate with the development of long-range maritime entrepreneurship, but also, to the unwillingness of other powers to maintain or encourage comparable activity. China did not persist with its naval expeditions of the early-fifteenth century, while the formidable naval forces deployed by Japan and Korea were short-range and were not maintained. This is a reminder of the crucial need to consider strategic tasks when assessing military capability, and also to consider relative capability in this light. The same is true in discussing the naval trajectories of European powers. Thus, in the Baltic, Black and Mediterranean Seas, there were tasks different from those of Atlantic operations.

Privateering

At the same time, the extent of privateering during the mid-seventeenth-century crisis that has been discerned in the 1640s and 1650s serves as a warning against stressing the extent of any revolution in naval organisation. Rebellion and civil war across much of Europe ensured that there was a host of authorities able to issue letters of marque to license privateering. For example, the privateering frigates of Randall, Marquess of Antrim, in the 1640s have been described as doubling as the Irish navy. Rebellion and civil war also greatly lessened the ability of states to suppress privateering and to protect trade and therefore revenues. As a result, although there are no comprehensive figures, it is probable that the European stock of seagoing vessels fell considerably. The situation in the Channel in the 1560s was akin to the situation in the 1650s. The Huguenot Prince of Condé, the English Earl of Warwick and the Prince of Orange all granted 'letters of marque' to privateers, and the sailors of the West Country, La Rochelle, the Breton ports and Zealand were only too willing to take them up.

The extent to which governments encouraged privateering can be presented both in purposeful and ‘progressive’ terms, as a response to the weakness of opponents, and, possibly less benignly, as a product of the weakness of governments and the resultant need to tap any military resources that might be available, even at the cost of very limited control. The creation of large fleets using partnership arrangements with commercial and investment interests, and the retention of capability by state-sponsored piracy, showed a degree of originality in thinking and organisational flexibility that had
The Nature of Warfare
To turn to tactical issues, fighting instructions existed in the 1590s, and were comprehensive for the Cadiz expedition of 1596. They were steadily developed as line tactics evolved, but a high degree of discipline and organisational cohesion were present as early as the Armada battles in the Channel (1588), although they did not maximise broadside firepower.

Looking ahead from the 1650s, it is possible to see fighting instructions and line tactics as instilling discipline and encouraging a new stage in organisational cohesion that permitted more effective firepower, one that was further enhanced when merchantmen ceased to appear in the line of battle of European fleets in the late-seventeenth century. However, it is necessary not to read back from this situation to the more inchoate position earlier as governments struggled to create and maintain effective fleets in a difficult political and organisational context and were faced with the particular resource requirements of naval strength.

It is frequently claimed that the armies of the period were unable to achieve major strategic or political goals, and that operations were frequently inconsequential, although also destructive. Such a discussion risks present-mindedness: modern concepts of decisiveness owe much to the achievement of unconditional victory in World War Two, but that is misleading even as a description of modern warfare and may be creating unrealistic expectations for contemporary conflicts (see J.M. Black, War, Past, Present and Future, Sutton, 2000).

It is also necessary to distinguish between different understandings of decisiveness, whether in terms of tactical or strategic considerations and whether defensive or offensive. A decisive battle or campaign can achieve a defensive goal. In addition, it is far from clear that discussion of decisiveness should centre on victory in battle. If the objective of a war was to win territory that could be retained at a subsequent peace, then successful sieges can be seen as ‘decisive’ to that end. Ultimately the problem is cultural. It is difficult for many to accept that warfare was ‘for real’ in a world in which artifice, convention and style played such a major role; and this is particularly the case because it has been contrasted with the apparently more vital, clear-cut and successful warfare of the Age of Revolution, more particularly the forces and ideologies of the American and French Revolutions. There is also a tendency to underrate the determination and ability of aristocratic societies.

Such views are rarely expressed explicitly, but they are no less influential for that. However, they adopt a misleading teleological approach and mistake style for substance. In fact, there was nothing inherently indecisive about tactics and strategy. Indecision was, if anything, a product of political rather than military factors, especially the inability of states to exploit fully and effectively the potential resources of their societies. Any account of warfare in 1618-60 reveals a series of decisive outcomes, including Dutch success in retaining independence (and territory) from Spain, the conquest of the British Isles by Parliamentary forces (on which, see most recently, J.S. Wheeler, The Irish and British Wars 1637-1654, Routledge, 2002), and the capacity of the Swedes to crush the Danes in both the 1640s and 1650s in extremely rapid and overwhelming campaigns, such that, without the intervention of the Dutch and other powers, it seems unlikely that the Danes would have maintained their position. Battles and sieges could be decisive instruments of policy, as the Habsburg triumph at the White Mountain (1620) and the Swedish victory at Breitenfeld (1631) amply demonstrated; while the threat of battle and siege shaped campaigns and policies even when no battle or siege occurred.

War was neither inconsequential nor predictable. It played a major role in determining European history, most particularly in ensuring that the Habsburgs were unable to fulfil their goals in reversing their losses since the 1550s. In addition, war left Sweden the dominant power in the Baltic and led to the defeat of Charles I’s plans. It also ensured the independence of Portugal from Habsburg control and the failure of Catalonia, Naples and Sicily to attain the same end.

Conflict between European powers spilled out beyond the continent with Spain and the Dutch fighting in the West Indies, Portugal and the Dutch fighting in Brazil, West Africa, Sri Lanka, India, and Malaysia, England and the Dutch in West Africa and elsewhere, and England and Spain in the West Indies. Much of this conflict involved autonomous forces, particularly those of East and West India Companies and privateers, but they indicated the range and variety of European war-making.

‘The Great European War Ballet’, a satirical print of 1647-48 which mocked European rulers at the end of the Thirty Years’ War. Proponents of the ‘Military Revolution’ theory have given undue prominence to the actions of statesmen in western Europe.
These operations also throw light on the vexed question of the chronology of military revolution. The customary emphasis is on the century 1560-1660 (Michael Roberts) or on an earlier extension (Geoffrey Parker). This was followed, in most analyses, by a less significant period before the age of Revolutionary warfare began with the Americans in 1775 and, more dramatically, the French in 1792. Yet this analysis dramatically underplays developments in warfare within Europe between 1660 and 1792, while, in terms of scale, the overseas conflicts between European powers prior to 1660 could not match those between Britain and France in 1754-62, and it is not surprising that the latter were of greater consequence. This issue can be linked to that of contrasting the relative importance of innovation with development and/or diffusion. The former tends to attract more attention in traditional accounts of revolution, not least if their emphasis is on technology, and on the heroic nature of invention; but this is of only partial use when considering impact.

War was central to the political and financial history of the period, as well as very important for social and economic developments, and for the fabric and ethos of life. In order to approach this, it is necessary to put aside schematic, if not simplistic, interpretations and to understand the diversity of military activity, change and impact.

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