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The Business of War. Military Enterprise and Military Revolution in Early Modern Europe

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After a period in which much historical attention has been directed to the rise of the early modern state, it now seems to be becoming fashionable to take the state out of the centre of the picture again. Perhaps this is attributable to the way in which the nation state's role has increasingly been brought into question in post-Cold War Europe, with the collapse of multi-ethnic states such as Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, the growth of separatism in many European regions, and the rise of supra-national bodies such as the EU. The social role of the state itself remains controversial, the subject of ongoing debates on both sides of the Atlantic, and affected by the growth of interest in charities, NGOs, and a putative 'Big Society'. In the case of the historical profession, it is no doubt salutary to shift perspectives from time to time, if only to maintain some freshness of approach. In the case of David Parrott's new analysis of the role of private enterprise in early modern warfare, the result of such a shift is a very welcome and stimulating addition to our knowledge.

Parrott situates his analysis in the undisputed context of an early modern Europe in which the scale of warfare grew steadily, both in terms of the size of armies and, he stresses, the duration of conflicts. This arose in the early 16th century and developed steadily through to the Thirty Years War and beyond, into the so-called 'age of absolutism'. Rulers thus faced a huge challenge in making their fiscal resources meet the

demands of their military ambitions; the problem of how to raise and provision armies was one of the greatest of the age, yet, as Parrott points out (pp. 261-4), the multitude of military manuals published in early modern Europe make next to no comment on these practical and financial difficulties, partly because they were such difficult and deep-rooted problems.

Historians have always tended to suggest rulers solved these problems by improving the workings of the state – raising more taxes, employing more officials, and expanding their authority, often at the expense of representative institutions. This was the argument of the ‘military revolution’ thesis proposed by Michael Roberts and defended by Geoffrey Parker. Warfare was thus accorded a central role in modern European history, providing a motor to turn the medieval state into the modern one. Considering what we know about the weaknesses of the operation of early modern states, the notion that warfare drove the creation of the modern state has always, perhaps, been one of the more unlikely elements of the military revolution thesis. The chambers full of bureaucrats busily toiling away to govern the state and administer the army in any kind of rational way were simply not there, and nor were the soldiers or police to impose their orders on the populace.

Parrott, however, challenges much of this overall narrative much more fundamentally. In place of states steadily growing to meet the demands of warfare, he shows that instead it was private enterprise that was called upon to fill many of the gaps and smooth out many of the bumps left by the state’s weakness. It has always been clear that private enterprise had a significant role in early modern warfare, and there is a considerable, albeit scattered, literature on mercenaries, privateering, military contracting and so on, in a variety of periods and national contexts. The argument presented here, however, is much more wide-ranging, suggesting convincingly that military enterprise was in fact virtually omnipresent in early modern warfare, and consequently deserves much greater consideration than it has received.

The first part of the book (chapters one to three) provides an overall survey of military enterprise between about 1500 and 1650, primarily looking at armies but also at naval warfare. There are detailed accounts of topics such as the renowned Swiss mercenaries and German landsknechts in the 16th century as well as the rival armies of the Thirty Years War in the 17th. There are also more surprising topics, such as the role of private enterprise in the French Wars of Religion, the Spanish Army of Flanders, the French and Spanish galley fleets, and elsewhere. This constitutes a very valuable survey, comparatively short, and accessible to good undergraduate students of war and society, a field which still has surprisingly few useful textbooks.

One of the key arguments here and throughout the book is that much of what we think we know about military enterprise is inaccurate. Prime amongst these is the supposed shortcomings of mercenaries. It is almost impossible now to place the word ‘mercenary’ in a positive context. Yet, as Parrott argues, there is no real reason to think that they were poor-quality men, cowardly, liable to treachery or desertion, or motivated more by pay or plunder than by accomplishing their employers’ objectives. Very often, the reverse was true. Furthermore, as Parrott also discusses with relish, the patriotic dream of citizen militias defending their homeland (a dream cherished by many authors of whom Machiavelli was only the best-known), was in practice just that, since few militias were markedly successful, at any rate in aggressive warfare. Mercenaries were often essential. Another long-established myth that should be mentioned is the supposed superiority of Dutch infantry training, a key exhibit in the military revolution thesis, which is convincingly dismissed as the propaganda of a small state doubting its own legitimacy and military might. These argumentative, effective exercises in debunking are one of the book’s most enjoyable features.

In chapters four and five, Parrott moves on to in-depth thematic analyses of aspects of the business of war. These chapters focus almost entirely on the Thirty Years War, which is very much the book’s centre of gravity (and indeed has long been regarded as the high point of military entrepreneurship). This was a period in which armies reached a remarkable level of privatisation, operating almost – though never wholly – independently from their parent sovereign authorities.

Chapter four looks at the impact of military contracting on the operational effectiveness of armies. Essentially, Parrott argues that the mercenary armies of the Thirty Years War were vastly more effective

than usually thought, especially later in the war, as they became smaller, leaner and tougher, and as commanders became increasingly accustomed to working in the peculiar conditions of that war. The argument here is that mercenary armies were more and not less effective than state-run armies, and Parrott argues that this was due to these armies being confederations of privately-owned regiments in which each colonel had a vested interest in improving the quality of his product. This argument does not seem wholly convincing, inasmuch as the increasing quality of the soldiers had as much to do with their experience, discipline and so on as it did with the terms of their service, and this chapter seems at times to drift into, effectively, an analysis of the operational context of the Thirty Years War – a valuable exercise in itself, but possibly not one which arises out of the central themes of the book. It is also (in this reviewer's opinion) surprising that by focusing on the operational level rather than the strategic in order to assess the effectiveness of the mercenary armies, this section of the book begins to read like an apologia for the conduct of the Thirty Years War itself. Parrott demonstrates (and praises) the operational brio of the commanders of the 1630s and 1640s, referring to their 'close synthesis of means and ends' (p. 195). This is persuasive, even masterly, operational analysis. But it creates an odd disjunction, since it appears to overlook their failure to achieve strategic results. However effective these armies were at many aspects of their job, the war still went on for three decades without achieving very much on the political level. By contrast, the French and Spanish monarchies are criticised for their 'lumbering' style of military operation, which accomplished little in a campaign season, but one can at least say that Louis XIV's wars achieved concrete results and expanded the frontiers of France.

Chapter five returns more directly to the central themes of the book, looking at how money was made from war, and how the structure of international business and finance provided advantages to soldiers and military planners, again primarily focusing on the Thirty Years War. This is again a valuable synthesis, highlighting the astonishing capability, versatility and range of the elite international merchants and financiers of the day, something which, as Parrott points out, stands in stark contrast to the often shambling efforts of contemporary states. This chapter also discusses the motivations of those who offered their services as military entrepreneurs, pointing out ways in which they gained both financially and in terms of 'social validation' for those from humbler or mercantile backgrounds – an elegant summary, although probably offering relatively little to surprise most readers.

In the book's final chapter, Parrott traces continuities and changes into the later 17th century and beyond. He argues that there was real change in this period, as the state finally began to get its act together. States became less dependent on enterprisers to provide them with ready-made regiments, and they exercised much greater control over navies. They still made use of private enterprise, but increasingly this was a matter of supplying goods or ships rather than whole units of men (and after all, virtually any state would expect to purchase some ready-made goods from the private market). Alongside this, chapter six sketches in important and interesting ways the response of the late 17th- and 18th-century state (especially in France) to essentially the same problems as it faced 150 years earlier: the need for yet more soldiers and more spending, and still-inadequate finances, especially in view of the difficulty of taxing the nobility. In place of the growth of state control of the army, there was a continued dependence on clientage, venality and private investment on the part of a nobility still committed to warfare, even as Louis XIV projected a facade of royal authority. According to this reading, armies only genuinely changed their character after the late 18th-century rise of revolutionary or citizen armies in which the status of the soldiers plummeted as battlefield casualties spiralled. This section of the book is less detailed than those looking at the 16th and early 17th centuries, being more of an interpretative essay than a definitive analysis, but it provides an appropriate and satisfying conclusion to the period covered by the book.

This is a book, then, that contains a great deal that is interesting, revealing and thought-provoking. What of its overall thesis, that privatized military activity was much more significant than historians have believed? At heart, this is clearly true: historians have underplayed private enterprise, not entirely whitewashing it, but tending to mention it in their accounts of the period as a sideline or a dead end. So the central argument of the book stands, and historians of early modern warfare are indebted to Parrott for it. It is important to place it in proportion, however, and the precise significance of this argument must be carefully considered. Firstly,

despite the importance of private enterprise in the conduct of warfare, the fact is that this ever-growing military activity still took place under the aegis, and for the greater glory, of the state or the ruler. It could be argued that it was immaterial whether the state's agents were 'private' or 'public' – its reach was still growing. A second, related, issue is the difficulty of drawing clear lines between 'public' and 'private' in this period. Where did the state end and the private sector begin? In the case of troop-raising, for example, how we choose to differentiate between a 'mercenary' and a 'regular soldier' may not make a great deal of sense in early modern practice. In both cases (allowing for variations in recruiting practices), a ruler might provide an individual captain with funds and with authority to raise men and send him off to recruit a company of soldiers. In both cases, the state paid; in both, the captain gained financially (in terms of salary or private profit). It is not always easy to identify whether we should identify this as 'private' or 'public'; indeed, to place too much stress on whether this was public or private risks falling into precisely the trap of thinking too much in Weberian terms that one is seeking to avoid. One might argue that if a military enterpriser was employed by a state, working for it and receiving income from it (or profiting by its permission), then in effect he became part of that state, part of that 'public' sector. In that sense, Parrott's argument becomes more about the *nature* of the state than its extent. A more explicit discussion of this problem would have been interesting.

In a sense all of this reminds us that early modern states themselves had remarkably small 'public sectors', according to strict definitions. Many of their employees (certainly in the English context with which this reviewer is most familiar) were part-timers, amateurs, even unpaid; they often confused their own funds and those of the state. But as Parrott often shows, negotiated co-operation between different groups in society could still allow the state to achieve its end, through public or private means. Either way, the state was almost invariably paying the piper and calling the tune; its power was growing, one way or another. The blurred line between 'public' and 'private' means that it is extremely difficult, and perhaps even meaningless, to try to draw a clear line between them. But if Parrott's point was to raise the question, to challenge the framework of the debate, then in this he succeeds.

In many ways, therefore, this is a very impressive book, a work of high synthesis. One cannot fail to admire Parrott's scholarship, not so much in terms of manuscript sources (in fact I did not spot a single manuscript listed in the notes or bibliography), but in a vast range of often obscure French, German, Italian, Dutch and Scandinavian literature as well as English. Few historians can have delved so deeply into the literature of so broad a chronological and geographical range of case studies. One slightly surprising exception, however, is the almost total neglect of any part of the British Isles, whose early modern military history is undergoing a significant revival in which the links between English and continental military practice are an important theme. There is almost no mention of the Civil Wars, and the New Model Army only gets two brief mentions. Given that Hungary, Spain, Denmark, Sweden and so on get fair amounts of coverage, the exclusion of England, Scotland and Ireland seems bordering on perverse.

Ultimately, there's no doubt that this is an important contribution to the literature of European warfare and of the European state throughout the early modern period. Although the book contains a great many good things, the detail and general argument has relatively little that is completely new. What *is* new is the way in which it is assembled into a generally persuasive and compelling argument, one that will demand the attention of anyone working in the field, requiring them to adjust their overall narratives of the period, re-evaluate their assumptions, and think about the roads not taken in the history of European warfare, societies and states.

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