

Richelieu's Army: War, Government and Society in France, 1624-1642

Review Number:

277

Publish date:

Tuesday, 30 April, 2002

Author:

David Parrott

ISBN:

9780521792097

Date of Publication:

2001

Price:

£60.00

Pages:

626pp.

Publisher:

Cambridge University Press

Publisher url:

<http://www.cambridge.org/uk/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521792097>

Place of Publication:

Cambridge

Reviewer:

Robert Frost

Cardinal Richelieu famously claimed in his *Testament Politique* that 'There is no nation on earth so little suited to war than our own', accusing the French of fickleness and impatience in even the least of tasks. It is unlikely that Richelieu was being ironic; his observation suggests frustration at the inability of his underlings to realise his grand schemes, an understandable reaction, perhaps, to the problems that France faced in the years following its entry to the Thirty Years War in 1635. Yet - so the usual story goes - Richelieu need not have worried; his life's work was about to bear fruit. If at his death in 1642 France's military position still gave great cause for concern, the famous triumph over Spain at Rocroi on 19 May 1643 opened a new era, in which commanders like the great Condé and Turenne carried all before them. By 1660, *la prépondérance espagnole* was at an end; Louis XIV's *grand siècle* was about to begin.

Richelieu's *Testament*, like other political testaments of the early modern period, was an artful document designed to secure its author's reputation. Yet its picture of the farsighted statesman laying the foundations for French greatness has proved remarkably durable. If revisionist historians have done much to undermine traditional views of Richelieu as the father of French absolutism, this has, on the whole, been more the result of a general assault on the whole concept of absolutism; in the traditionalist world of foreign policy and military history, much of the Cardinal's reputation as a hard-headed state-builder survives. According to this line of reasoning, despite his conviction that France must contest hegemony with its Habsburg enemies, Richelieu wisely kept the country out of the Thirty Years War as long as he could, while preparing its

military forces to face the excellent Habsburg armies. After successfully fighting a covert war by proxy, the defeat of his Swedish ally at Nördlingen in September 1634 forced Richelieu into open war. If the early fighting went badly for France, this was due to the inexperience of its armies. Nevertheless, his military reforms had laid good foundations: the French army, once it had found its feet, proved more than a match for its enemies. If the turning-point came after his death, he was largely responsible for it.

This view still dominates textbook accounts, despite the fact that David Parrott, in his doctoral thesis and a string of important articles, has long been suggesting that it is deeply flawed. With this book, which builds impressively on his earlier work, he has produced a dazzling *tour de force* that renders much of the current orthodoxy obsolete and poses fundamental questions about the history not just of seventeenth-century France, but of Europe as a whole. It is set in the context of the long-running debate on the 'Military Revolution'. Unlike so many military historians, however, Parrott has fully grasped that Michael Roberts, when he launched the debate which revived the reputation of military history as a respectable occupation for well-adjusted adults, was not concerned with military change as such, but with its impact. Alas, much of the debate has degenerated into recondite squabbles about this or that military innovation, and many of the works it has spawned stay resolutely bogged down on the battlefield or in the siege-trench. Most authors have either ignored the wider impact altogether, or have merely stated *ex cathedra*, like Sir John Hale, that the link which Roberts saw between technical military developments and social and political change did not exist, without subjecting the problem to serious analysis.

Parrott does: the heart of his book is a minutely-researched and brilliantly conceived analysis of the army in its relationship to French society and the French state. It is based on exhaustive research in French archives, supplemented by Italian archival material that does much to rescue the Italian theatre of war from the obscurity to which so many historians have confined it. Also impressive is the massive basis of secondary reading: unlike many historians of France, Parrott reads German and is fully conversant with recent revisionist accounts of the Thirty Years War.

His massive scholarly labours give him the base from which he launches a profound and bold set of arguments. He begins with a masterly analysis of the conduct of warfare in the first half of the seventeenth century which shows that he is perfectly capable of writing excellent battle history even if - as he stresses - the traditional concentration on battles still distorts much writing on military history. From the outset it is clear that, while he does not deny the rapid pace of military change in the period, Parrott is deeply sceptical with regard to the 'Military Revolution' thesis, arguing that Roberts's picture of a 'progressive' Dutch and Swedish tradition opposed to a 'traditional' Habsburg school is fundamentally flawed. Much of this is familiar from his previous work, but here it is carried off with a richness of texture and detail which is truly impressive.

Equally valuable is the overview of France at war from 1624 to 1642 that follows. Here Parrott stresses that, far from the visionary statesman preparing for the best moment to intervene in the Thirty Years War, Richelieu was gradually and inexorably drawn into what he had long sought to avoid: a multi-front conflict for which France was singularly unprepared. Of particular interest is Parrott's innovative sketch of France's limited wars in Italy and Lorraine between 1629 and 1635, which makes very clear the significance of much of what followed.

The main part of the book, however, is an exhaustive dissection of all aspects of the financing, recruitment, administration and deployment of the French forces between 1624 and 1642. This begins with a detailed consideration of the most basic of problems: the actual size of the army. Parrott demonstrates conclusively that French armies of this period were far smaller than is usually suggested. This is important: if Geoffrey Parker criticised much of Roberts's version of the 'Military Revolution', he accepted the central contention that one of its major results was a massive increase in army size. It was the increasingly large military establishments of the seventeenth century which put pressure on states, driving the process of state-formation. Following Parrott's forensic dissection of the French sources, nobody will be able to rely any more on Parker's figures on European army size, which turn up everywhere. According to Parrott, even at a liberal estimate, French troops on campaign between 1635 and 1642 numbered no more than 70-80,000 in

total, far short of previous estimates. He dismisses the possibility that Richelieu maintained the 25,000-plus garrison troops which would have been necessary to bring the total army size up to the 100 -120,000 men accepted in the supposedly conservative estimates of previous historians.

After a section on paying for war, in which he builds on the excellent work of Richard Bonney, James Collins, Daniel Dessert and others, Parrott considers the recruitment and maintenance of the army, its civil administration, the management of the war-effort by *commissaires* and *intendants*, the relationship between the ministry and the high command, concluding with a chapter on the army and the civilian population. As he points out, traditional views of France's war-effort are contradictory. On the one hand, we are told that the poor showing in the early years after 1635 was due to a necessary period of adjustment, in which the government and army command solved the basic problems of control, finance and supply; once this was achieved, the famous *tournant militaire* took place, symbolised by the great victory at Rocroi. On the other hand, however, we are also told that Richelieu avoided full-scale involvement in the war before 1635 precisely in order to make the preparations that would allow for the more effective deployment of resources (p. 110). In fact, as Parrott shows, France had been far from inactive in military terms between 1624 and 1635; the difference thereafter was that, instead of conducting campaigns which, although by no means as limited as is frequently suggested, were concentrated on one or two fronts, France had to conduct multi-front campaigns which seriously taxed its administrative and financial resources.

According to Parrott, Richelieu's government fell woefully short in confronting this task. It entered the war in 1635 after a massive miscalculation by the *surintendants des finances*, who had converted *droits* into paper *rentes* on a huge scale, leaving the crown with few cash resources and forcing it to launch a ruinous cycle of borrowing from private financiers at high rates of interest. Parrott convincingly argues this demonstrates that, whatever the historians say, the French government on the eve of its famous declaration of war on Spain in 1635 did *not* anticipate that it would be drawn into a major European war (p. 238). When it was, however, far from the military pressures provoking a response in favour of the sort of bureaucratic and financial pressures which led to the modern state, they forced Richelieu and his successors into a series of ad hoc measures which merely exacerbated existing weaknesses within the French system of government: venality was expanded, the role of private financiers increased, corruption and creative accounting rose to unprecedented levels and no less than 75 per cent of contracts with *munitionnaires* were met by assigning revenues rather than with cash payments. Even at the start of the war, such practices had already ensured that the *taille*, assessed at 58 million livres in 1635, only produced 20 million livres in cash. Every military setback threw the inappropriately-named Bullion, *surintendant des finances*, into a panic over the willingness of private financiers to advance more credit. Thus the French state mortgaged its future and entered the vicious circle of debt financing which finally crippled it in the late eighteenth century. France, unlike other contemporary powers, rejected the system of military contracting and entrepreneurship, in which professional mercenaries raised and led armies, for a more traditional system based on the native *noblesse d'épée*. Thus aristocratic values permeated the officer corps, in which *les grands*, even when far from competent, sought commands suitable to their rank. When the ministry tried to ensure greater obedience to its wishes by pairing aristocratic commanders with its own *créatures*, the effect was not what was intended: since no self-respecting *grand* would accept subordination to anybody not their clear superior in the social hierarchy, a ludicrous system of alternation was established, in which control was swapped back and forth between the two commanders on successive days.

Thus an over-ambitious war effort, conducted with inadequate mechanisms to secure the mobilisation of France's undoubtedly superior resources, brought the country ultimately to the edge of political collapse in the *Frondes* which broke out six years after Richelieu's death. And if historians turn their eyes away from the odd highpoint such as Rocroi, and view the war effort as a whole, it appears much less effective than is usually suggested - general histories always mention Rocroi, but rarely remember Tuttlingen, fought the same year, in which the French army of Germany was virtually destroyed. Parrott's refusal to ignore the lesser fronts is particularly praiseworthy and gives a much more rounded picture of France's war-effort than is usual elsewhere. In general, far from ever-larger armies roaming the continent, much of the fighting was actually sustained by forces of about 10 -15,000 men. When the system came under strain, the government

was forced to prioritise, with some fronts suffering complete collapse: in 1637 the Valtelline army simply ceased to exist. Armies faced all-but crippling wastage rates, were raised largely on the credit extended by their noble commanders and were held together only by 'a veneer of discipline and subjection to common objectives, under which individual insubordination and corruption were almost universal' (p. 286). Moreover, since pay was always in substantial arrears and arrangements for billeting and winter quarters were inadequate, armies secured their existence through arbitrary levies on the local population or simple banditry.

It is a bleak picture. Yet is it entirely convincing? On the whole, it is. Parrott's brilliant analysis of the French army in this crucial period confirms much of the revisionist view of French history and, for the first time, it convincingly integrates foreign policy and war into the picture. It also provides an interpretation of Richelieu's ministry that explains much about what was to follow. If I have any doubts - and they are insignificant - they concern Parrott's attitude to the whole question of the 'Military Revolution', for it is here that the author himself seems to express the odd uncertainty.

Despite his general scepticism in this regard, Parrott recognises at many points that warfare *had* changed, and with it the demands that it placed on governments. For all his - utterly convincing - assault on those who exaggerate French army size in this period, he nevertheless in essence accepts Roberts's conclusions, pointing out with regard to French strategy in 1639, when Louis XIII took direct charge of the siege of Hesdin, which meant that all available resources were poured into one campaign, that this represented a return to the strategy of the early sixteenth century: a massive thrust against a single point in the Habsburg system. 'Yet what made good sense in the 1530s or 1550s, *when the total size of armed forces was much smaller* (my italics), was a far less sensible deployment of resources in the 1630s when other campaign theatres would be neglected only at considerable peril' (p. 137). Thus, if Parrott argues that in this period the French army was much smaller than historians once thought, he accepts that it was still much bigger than it had been. Moreover, if he denies that there was the great leap in size between 1634 and 1636 postulated by many historians (p. 166), he accepts that even if the figures for the later reign of Louis XIV are inflated, they are considerably larger than those for the period of Richelieu's ministry. War *had* changed in scale; not least, as Roberts suggested, through the growing tendency to keep troops under arms over the winter, rather than dismissing them at the end of each campaign. This affected France from 1636/7, when considerable efforts were directed to keeping large parts of the army in winter quarters rather than disbanding them.

In essence, Parrott therefore accepts the broad outlines of the developments sketched in by Roberts. He is keen, however, to detach them from notions of state-building, arguing that the 'growth in the size of armies was not necessarily either a product or a cause of administrative and financial developments in the state' (p. 549). Thus he implicitly - and to my mind rightly - dissociates himself from Jeremy Black's attempt to refute the 'Military Revolution' thesis by claiming that an efficient state organisation was a necessary precondition for substantial changes in the waging of war. Yet Roberts himself warned that the linkages between state development and military change were complex, and was wary of attempts to depict 'absolutist' states imposing new systems of authority with their newly-efficient armies.

It is here that Parrott's concentration on Richelieu's army can, at times, be a little frustrating. For the great Cardinal died in 1642, when the Thirty Years War still had six years to run, and the Franco-Spanish war another seventeen - well over twice the period Richelieu was in charge of the French war-effort - and these *were* periods where France enjoyed considerable military success. Parrott does have a fair amount to say about Mazarin's ministry, but he does not say it with anything like the same level of detail. If he shows convincingly that the crucial transformation did not take place under Richelieu, he does suggest at several points that it *did* take place under Louis XIV, even if the Sun King was reacting against, rather than building upon, Richelieu's work. As he recognises, the coming of peace did not bring the disbanding of the French army and Louis XIV embarked on his personal rule with a military force not significantly smaller than that which Richelieu and Mazarin had sustained in war, paid for by taxes which continued to be extracted at near war-time levels (p. 228). When this army was next used, in the late 1660s and early 1670s, it swept all before it (pp. 78, 554).

This was precisely the sort of transformation to which Roberts was pointing, and it is perhaps a pity that Parrott does not say a little more on this point. Roberts was, above all, concerned with the emergence of a new military world of permanent armies maintained in peace as well as war, and a new relationship between these armies and the societies which maintained them. If historians are prepared to jettison the often crude and teleological model of state-building which few serious early modernists would now endorse, and forget their obsession with the watchwords of 'modernisation', such as bureaucratisation, rationalisation and efficiency, then the 'Military Revolution' thesis still has much to offer; indeed Parrott's work suggests - at least to this reviewer - that the French experience is in many senses comparable to that of other states. All early modern governments struggled to cope with the burden of war. If solutions were found, they were solutions which developed within already extant political frameworks; thus the outcomes in Sweden, Denmark, Prussia, Russia, Austria or Britain were very different, and no one model fits all cases. Each system had to experience a period of crisis, in which the government struggled to cope; in France this was precisely the period covered by this book, extended down to the end of the *Fronde*. The key breakthrough was the acceptance by the political and social elites of the burdens, either financial or in terms of service, of the new military system. Parrott's work suggests that the French nobility did accept the considerable, if hidden financial burdens of serving as officers in the new-style army, securing recognition of their status in return. This bargain was secured by the victories of 1648 and 1659, and the army became permanent. This achievement - within Roberts's timeframe - made possible the victories of Louis XIV's early years. Yet, as Parrott's work makes clear, by entrenching certain aspects of the old system, the peculiarly French solution to the challenges posed by the great increase in the scale of warfare stored up problems for the future. It was not that the French had no aptitude for war, but rather that they had a peculiar way of organising and paying for it which frustrated generations of reformers. Perhaps that is what Richelieu meant.

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/277>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2595>