

The king's army

Warfare, soldiers, and society during the
Wars of Religion in France, 1562–1576

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Introduction

Le secret des finances de France, published in 1581 under the pseudonym Nicolas Froumenteau, estimated that well over one million people had lost their lives in the religious strife that raged almost continuously in France between 1560 and 1580. Included in this total were some twenty thousand Catholic clergy, thirty thousand nobles, eighty thousand victims of massacres and executions, and hundreds of thousands of common soldiers. The material costs of warfare had also been high: since 1550 war-related taxes alone had exceeded 300 million *livres* while the depredations of armies had cost more than ten times that amount. Over 100,000 individual dwellings and some 600 villages had been destroyed.¹

Whatever the precise accuracy of these grim figures, Froumenteau's contemporaries could have had few illusions about the tremendous financial, material, and human costs of the wars of religion, costs that were the direct result of their militarily indecisive nature: by 1581 they had been grinding on remorselessly for almost two decades, and no end was in sight. Civil war had become the defining experience for the French people and would remain so until the end of the sixteenth century.²

¹ For an analysis of Froumenteau's work see James B. Wood, "The Impact of the Wars of Religion: A View of France in 1581," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 15, no. 2 (1984), 131–68.

² The best general history of France during the sixteenth century remains J. H. M. Salmon, *Society in Crisis: France in the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1975). On the era of the wars of religion James Westfall Thompson, *The Wars of Religion in France, 1559–1576* (New York, 1909), remains useful, though it is very outdated. Among more recent work see Michel Pernot, *Les guerres de religion en France, 1559–1598* (Paris, 1987); Henry Heller, *Iron and Blood: Civil Wars in Sixteenth-Century France* (Montreal, 1991); and Mack Holt, *The French Wars of Religion* (Cambridge, 1995). The most convincing summary of developments during the period of the first five wars is the conclusion to Philip Benedict, *Rouen During the Wars of Religion* (New York, 1981), 233–50. Robert R. Harding, *Anatomy of a Power Elite: The Provincial Governors of Early Modern France* (New Haven, 1978) and Mack Holt, *The Duke of Anjou and the Politique Struggle During the Wars of Religion* (Cambridge, 1986) are also very useful, especially on the transition to the later wars. The most illuminating and convincing studies of religious violence, besides Benedict's work on Rouen, are Natalie Z. Davis, "The Rites of Violence," chapter 6 in her *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford, 1975), 152–187, and Barbara B. Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross. Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth Century Paris* (Oxford, 1991). But see also Denis Crouzet, *Les guerriers de Dieu: La violence au temps des troubles de religion, vers 1525-vers 1610* (Seysssel, 1990), 2 vols. For the socioeconomic impact of the wars during this period see Jean Jacquart, *La crise rurale en Ile-de-France, 1550–1670* (Paris, 1974), and E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Les paysans de Languedoc* (Paris, 1966), 2 vols.

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During the reign of Charles IX (1560–74) there were five successive general civil wars marked by extensive formal military operations. During those early wars, the last of which continued into the beginning of Henry III's reign, the monarchy always enjoyed substantial advantages in military resources and its army won most of the battles and sieges it fought. But a decisive military victory over the Huguenots eluded the royal forces, preventing the suppression or destruction of their enemy and leading to temporizing and sometimes humiliating peace treaties at the end of every war that compromised royal authority while doing little to prevent the renewal of fighting.³ This enabled the Huguenots to survive and recover between wars and in some places to strengthen their position, which in turn prolonged the warfare and the suffering, and prevented France from playing a very significant role in international affairs during most of the second half of the sixteenth century.

Given the direct and frequently catastrophic impact of the civil wars in France, it would seem critically important to focus scholarly attention on their course and conduct. Many other aspects of French history during the wars of religion have been extensively studied, but social, political, and religious historians have long been content to ignore the military side of the civil wars. Even among military historians the period remains little understood and largely ignored. For decades there was only the posthumous work of Ferdinand Lot devoted to the royal army during the Hapsburg–Valois wars, which, though not concerned with the events after 1562, at least provided a brief sketch of the royal army near the beginning of the religious wars.⁴ Besides Lot, the only significant recent contribution in French to the military history of the wars is a single general chapter by André Corvisier in

³ For the peace treaties see N. M. Sutherland, *The Huguenot Struggle for Recognition* (New Haven, 1980).

⁴ Ferdinand Lot, *Recherches sur les effectifs des armées françaises des Guerres d'Italie aux Guerres de Religion, 1494–1562* (Paris, 1962). See also Hélène Michaud, "Les institutions militaires des guerres d'Italie aux guerres de religion," *Revue historique*, 258, no. 1 (1977), 29–43; the very useful article by Philippe Contamine, "Les industries de guerre dans la France de la Renaissance: L'exemple de l'artillerie," *Revue historique*, 172 (1984), 249–80, and David Potter's excellent operational study, "The duc de Guise and the fall of Calais, 1557–1558," *The English Historical Review*, 388 (July, 1983), 481–512. Howell Lloyd, *The Rouen Campaign, 1590–1592. Politics, Warfare, and the Early Modern State* (Oxford, 1973), is an in-depth analysis of an important episode near the end of the sixteenth-century wars. See also Jean de Pablo, "Contribution à l'étude de l'histoire des institutions militaires huguenotes, ii, L'armée huguenote entre 1562 et 1573," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 48, no. 2 (1957), 192–216, and the appropriate chapters in the old, but still stimulating, Sir Charles Oman, *A History of the Art of War in the Sixteenth Century*, reprint of 1937 ed. (New York, 1979). John A. Lynn's "Tactical Evolution in the French Army, 1560–1660," *French Historical Studies*, 14 (1985), 176–91, while an interesting attempt at an overview, is based too narrowly on secondary sources. James B. Wood, "The Royal Army During the Early Wars of Religion, 1559–1576," in Mack P. Holt, ed., *Society and Institutions in Early Modern France. Essays presented to J. Russell Major* (Athens, 1991), 1–35, represents my initial attempt to identify the most important military problems confronted by the royal army during the civil wars. I thank the University of Georgia Press for permission to use material that first appeared in chapter 1 of this publication.

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the first volume of the projected four-volume *Histoire militaire de la France*.⁵ This lack of work by French scholars has recently been somewhat offset by David Potter's study of warfare and the organization of French military power in Picardy between 1470 and 1560. But though Potter's work greatly expands our knowledge of the impact of the Hapsburg-Valois wars on the most militarily exposed province in France, it, like Lot's study, ends before the beginning of the wars of religion.⁶

It is surprising, then, how little historical attention has been devoted to the period's military events and the people involved in them – surprising and distressing. For how profound can our understanding of the period of the wars of religion be if we know so little about how its wars were fought and why their course was so indecisive, prolonged, and destructive? This study of the royal army is intended to put warfare back at the center of the French wars of religion. It explores in detail a form of warfare that in its technical, social, and cultural aspects can seem quite foreign today, and it contextualizes that warfare in a way that connects it to and sheds light on the social and political history of the period. In direct contrast to traditional portrayals of the military aspects of the civil wars as hopelessly confused, aimless, and meaningless, the book seeks to make the overall conduct and outcome of the warfare of the period understandable without at all losing sight of the wars' human dimensions. In particular it brings into sharp focus the reasons for the failure of the monarchy to deal a knock-out blow to the Huguenots in the critical opening phases of the civil war and traces how that failure led to the prolongation of the conflict for over three decades.

As the only comprehensive account of the organization and operations of the forces under royal control during the French civil wars, the book bridges the gap between comparable studies dealing with the periods before and after the wars of religion.⁷ It therefore completes a survey, decades in the making, of the history of the relationship between military forces, warfare, society, and the state in France from late medieval times to the death of Louis XIV. Thus it should make a timely contribution to the ongoing debate about the origin and nature of the so-called Military Revolution, the transformation of feudal hosts into the standing armies and navies, and the bureaucracies that supported them, which enabled early modern European states to consolidate power, fight one another on an unparalleled scale, and dominate much of the rest of the world.⁸

Since a study of this kind involves a combination of military, political, social, economic, and cultural history, I have cast a much wider net for evidence than traditional military historians usually do. Thus it makes systematic use of long

⁵ André Corvisier, "Les guerres de religion, 1559–1598," chapter XIII, in *HM*, 304–30.

⁶ David Potter, *War and Government in the French Provinces. Picardy, 1470–1560* (Cambridge, 1993).

⁷ Principally Potter, *Picardy*; Philippe Contamine, *Guerre, état et société à la fin du moyen âge. Études sur les armées des rois de France, 1337–1494* (Paris, 1972), and André Corvisier, *L'armée française de la fin du XVIIe siècle au ministère de Choiseul: Le soldat* (Paris, 1964), 2 vols. *HM* is also generally good for the earlier and later periods.

⁸ Geoffrey Parker, *The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road, 1567–1659* (Cambridge, 1972) and *The*

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neglected materials in French archives, including: war plans; headquarter log-books; military correspondence; tables of organization; muster, ration, and pay records; casualty lists; state budgets; arsenal inventories; technical memoranda; disciplinary codes; and illustrations of soldiers and armies in action. As a result it rests on a comprehensive and extensive documentary – rather than simply a memorialistic – base.

In terms of organization, the book begins with a narrative of the principal military campaigns of the crown during the first five civil wars. It then examines the prewar and peacetime armies as well as the forces mobilized by the crown during the civil war period itself. Analyses of the three principal and distinctive military and social components of the royal army – the infantry, cavalry, and artillery – and the effects on them of chronic campaigning in an unprecedented civil war situation follow. Four detailed case studies of the royal army on campaign and in action – the battle of Dreux in 1562, the defense of Chartres in 1567–68, the Jarnac–Moncontour campaign in 1568–69, and the siege of La Rochelle in 1573 – illustrate the actual conduct of operations, illuminate the human dimensions of camp, march, and combat, and identify the principal determinants of military success or failure. The last chapter investigates the cost of mounting military campaigns and the reasons for the crown's increasing inability to pay for them. The book concludes with an assessment of the limits imposed on the crown's ability to act by the fragility of its instrument of war and the consequences this had for society and government during the remainder of the civil war years. A discussion of the sources used in writing this account will be found in the Appendix.

My principal argument is that the ultimate failure of the royal army to achieve a decisive victory over the Huguenots grew out of a deep and intractable set of military problems which from 1562 on manifested themselves as a repeating cycle of military insufficiency. As we shall see, this cycle provided the civil wars with a perverse kind of continuity and made it virtually impossible for the crown to achieve clear and decisive military outcomes. The obstacles to victory were further compounded after 1567 when the army's major operations had to shift south of the Loire river, into increasingly difficult country, far from the monarchy's most secure political and resource base, and against ever more effectively fortified, inaccessible, and fanatically defended places. By 1576 the chronic and unrelenting warfare (the army was in the field in nine of the ten years between 1567 and 1576) had exhausted the army, debased its behavior, and produced a

Military Revolution. Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500–1800; William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power. Technology, Armed Force, and Society, since A.D. 1000* (Chicago, 1982); J. R. Hale, *War and Society in Renaissance Europe, 1450–1620* (New York, 1985). John F. Guilmartin, *Gunpowder and Galleys: Changing Technology and Mediterranean Warfare at Sea in the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1974); Simon Pepper and Nicholas Adams, *Firearms and Fortifications. Military Architecture and Siege Warfare in Sixteenth Century Siena* (Chicago, 1986). See also Fred Anderson, *A People's Army. Massachusetts Soldiers and Society in the Seven Years' War* (New York, 1985); John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York, 1976); Christopher R. Friedrichs, *Urban Society in an Age of*

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profound and quasi-permanent failure of royal finances that essentially paralyzed the crown's ability to exert effective military force against its disobedient subjects.

The nature and ultimate outcome of the civil wars in France, then, were determined not by their religious origins but by the combination of religious rebellion and an incomplete Military Revolution. Fully mobilized, the royal army was a formidable instrument of war. But the material and technical means of waging war had yet to be totally monopolized by the state, and the integration of firearms and artillery with more effective fortifications made sieges of even poorly defended towns and cities a formidable and time-consuming task. Moreover the financial and administrative apparatus of the French state was not yet capable of sustaining the expanded forces needed to fight extensive campaigns over long periods of time, and the peacetime army was too small and dispersed to overawe the opposition or prevent the outbreak or renewal of civil war. What presented problems for the state, however, offered opportunity for the Protestant minority in France, since all that was needed to exploit these vulnerabilities was a cause capable of mobilizing widespread support.

When religion fused with rebellion, the Huguenots were able with their own resources or the aid of foreign powers to sustain military resistance long enough to exhaust both the royal army and the royal treasury. Easy to begin, the civil wars were too difficult and expensive to fight to any clear conclusion. The result was military stalemate; it was also widespread devastation and misery, and postponement to the seventeenth century of any serious attempt by the French monarchy to solve the problems that the still incomplete Military Revolution posed for all governments of the time.

War: Nördlingen, 1580–1720 (Princeton, 1979); Myron P. Gutmann, *War and Rural Life in the Early Modern Low Countries* (Princeton, 1980); and J. R. Hale, *Artists and Warfare in Renaissance Europe* (New Haven, 1990). And though it by no means exhausts the literature on these subjects the interested reader can also consult with profit: Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Sian Reynolds (New York, 1972), 2 vols.; André Corvisier, *Armies and Societies in Europe, 1494–1789*, trans. Abigail T. Siddall (Bloomington, 1979); M. E. Mallet and J. R. Hale, *The Military Organization of a Renaissance State: Venice, c. 1400 to 1617* (New Haven, 1984); John A. Lynn, ed., *Tools of War. Instruments, Ideas, and Institutions of Warfare, 1445–1871* (Urbana, 1990), "The *trace italienne* and the Growth of Armies: The French Case," *The Journal of Military History*, 55, no. 3 (1991), 297–330, and "How War Fed War: The Tax of Violence and Contributions During the *Grand Siècle*," *The Journal of Modern History*, 65 (June, 1993), 286–310, as well as *Feeding Wars. Logistics in Western Warfare from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Boulder, 1993); Clifford J. Rogers, *The Military Revolution. Readings on the Military Transformation of Early Modern Europe* (Boulder, 1995); Brian M. Downing, *The Military Revolution and Political Change. Origins of Democracy and Autocracy in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton, 1992); Russell F. Weigley, *The Age of Battles. The Quest for Decisive Warfare from Breitenfeld to Waterloo* (Bloomington, 1991); Richard Bonney, *The European Dynastic States, 1494–1660* (New York, 1991); Jeremy Black, *European Warfare 1660–1815* (New Haven, 1994); David Kaiser, *Politics and War. European Conflict from Philip II to Hitler* (Harvard, 1990); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York, 1987); and John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York, 1993).