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978-0-521-03248-3 - Giant of the Grand Siècle: The French Army, 1610-1715

John A. Lynn

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THE FRENCH ARMY, 1610-1715

John A. Lynn

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign



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*To the memory of my parents,
Judd Benjamin Lynn (1903–1958)
Adelle Savage Lynn (1908–1985)*

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Preface

I keep safe the memory of an invisible giant. The son of kings, this armed colossus once towered above his foes to bstride a continent. He ate a mountain of bread and drank a river of wine at each meal. Yet historians renowned for being the most forward looking and sophisticated in skill and interpretation, fail to see him; they write as if he never existed. He must be invisible. Otherwise, how could something so big, so costly, and so powerful remain so long unnoticed? This book is a portrait of that giant, the French army of the *grand siècle*, made visible again.

THE GREAT UNKNOWN

As a subject for historical inquiry, the army of the *grand siècle* has attracted the attention of only a few diligent scholars and talented amateurs, but it has never been at center stage, in the spotlight. Such neglect seems all the more bizarre given the self-evident importance of the subject. The army of the *grand siècle* was the largest institution created by the monarchy; in the 1690s its paper strength climbed to 420,000 men, over six times larger than it had been a century before. The wars of Louis XIII and Louis XIV defined the borders of the state, and the needs of the army that fought those wars shaped its government. Supporting such a gargantuan force also exhausted France and in one fashion or another imposed upon the lives of most of her population. Certainly such an army deserves to be cast in a central role. Yet it remains but dimly perceived.

It is easier to prove that few have seen the giant than to explain why. An understanding of this disregard, such selective blindness, must account for, first, those with a predisposition to regard the history of war as something of inherent interest or practical value and, second and more importantly, those with a broader view of the past for its own sake.

French authors who turned to history to satisfy an audience excited by tales of martial glory, a popular audience that has always seemed to be there,

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extolled French Imperial conquests, not the *grand siècle*. The glare of Napoleonic brilliance outshone the radiance of the Sun King. The Napoleonic wars have probably attracted more attention from nineteenth and twentieth century readers than any other period of French military history. Library shelves groan under the weight of works on the campaigns of Napoleon, yet to my knowledge the only complete history of the campaigns of Louis XIV was written in the first half of the eighteenth century – the seven-volume study by the marquis de Quincy, *Histoire militaire de Louis le Grand roi de France* (1727).

Soldier historians who studied military history for what it might teach them about the conduct of future wars also shunned Louis XIV in favor of Napoleon I. The Section historique of the French general staff, which operated between 1899 and 1914, provides one measure of the military's interests; it published eighty volumes on the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars but only six specialized studies dealing with the reign of Louis XIV.¹ After all, the emperor had marched his armies across Europe, from Lisbon to Moscow, while Louis's forces ventured less far from home. Napoleon's wars were short and decisive, brought to a head in climactic battles, at least until the debacle of 1812, while Louis's conflicts dragged on as long, indecisive, and costly wars of attrition. In short, there seemed to be more to be learned from a study of Napoleon's military genius. To this day, war colleges dissect the Ulm-Austerlitz and Jena-Auerstadt campaigns, but they have little interest in the siege-dominated wars fought by Louis's great generals.

It is harder to explain why historians of a more general cast of mind have not discussed the military institutions of the seventeenth century to any great degree. Only in the nineteenth century did Europeans turn seriously to writing history as something other than a means of memorializing the past, mining it for moral examples, or employing it to abstract rules and principles. The professional historians living in that period studied the *grand siècle* and produced major biographies, histories, and collections of documents. One such collection assembled by Jean Pelet and François Vault, *Mémoires militaires relatifs à la succession d'Espagne* (1835–62), dealt with military matters extensively, but it was the exception. Pelet was, in fact, a general with the staff and the director of the military archives. While Richelieu, Louis XIV, Colbert, and other dominant figures received their biographers, the army remained in the shadows. Perhaps the most obvious answer for this neglect is that French scholars left the discussion of military phenomena to military enthusiasts and specialists, who, as we have seen, had other things on their minds.

The lack of interest in seventeenth-century warfare among French scholars in the decades after World War I is more easy to comprehend. The great war became the focus of professional military studies, pushing aside the

¹ John A. Lynn, "The Publications of the *Section historique*, 1899–1915," *Military Affairs* (April 1973), 56–59. The count of volumes given here is a count of volumes not of titles, so multivolume works are added in by the number of volumes in the work.

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Napoleonic fixation, while the long casualty lists horrified the intellectuals. How could those who witnessed the massacre of Verdun speak of war without revulsion? As a consequence, the modern intellectual's inherent distaste for the study of war only grew. But the historical community harbored additional motives for turning a blind eye to the military past. Shock at the human cost of World War I was amplified by fashions in professional historical studies in France as they turned decidedly to the left. Warfare seemed a far less important subject for study than did society and economics, which, it was claimed, explained the existence of armed conflict in the first place. The most notable historical work on the wars of Louis XIV that appeared between the world wars centered on Vauban, the great fortress builder, perhaps as a reflection of the Maginot Line psychology. Certainly, having just endured a monstrous war of attrition, the French had no desire to relive the endless wars fought by the Sun King.

After World War II, the giant remained unseen. Historiographical trends in France and elsewhere continued to drift to the left. All too often, enthusiasm for social history was coupled with contempt for political history. Many French scholars became fascinated with history "from below" and emphasized the life of the lower classes; others stressed the need to study the "*longue durée*," rejecting political events, most notably wars, as mere surface phenomena. Particularly in America, the historical community has most often paid attention to military institutions only to condemn them and has mistakenly censured those who concentrate on the military past as individuals who must idealize war. Adding to this sense of revulsion is the notion that while the exploration of other phenomena is uplifting and part of a positive social or political program, the study of military history possesses no social value. The American intelligentsia's natural and abiding distaste for military history became even deeper during the Vietnam war. Today, the "cutting edge" of scholarship welcomes gender and cultural studies to form a blessed trinity with social themes and condemns the history of war and military institutions with what seems to be growing self-righteous conviction.

There have been some recent attempts, however, to ascertain what has been invisible for so long. André Corvisier, in his social examination, *L'armée française de la fin du XVIIe siècle au ministère du Choiseul: Le soldat* (1964), translated the study of the military into a mode acceptable to dominant currents of interpretation. Corvisier has been a key mover in the effort to read military institutions back into their social context, an effort solemnized in numerous books written in a "war and society" vein. While war and society studies may have opened the door to the profession at large, the price of grudging and partial approval has been the acceptance of an agenda dictated by those with little interest in the military per se. A related trend that has won ground for military history of the *ancien régime* is the debate over a Military Revolution in early modern Europe. This began with the publication of an inaugural lecture by Michael Roberts in 1956 and accelerated with the publication in 1988 of Geoffrey Parker's *The Military Revolution*:

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Military innovation and the rise of the West, 1500–1800. While this historiographical discussion has stimulated a great deal of new work, it has hurried on to sweeping conclusions before mastering the details. In their rush, scholars have again passed by the army of the *grand siècle* without giving it much of a second glance. Clearly the theory of the Military Revolution cries out for a study of the greatest of the seventeenth-century armies, but it has yet to appear.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL LIMITATIONS

This account of why the army of the *grand siècle* has remained largely invisible does not mean that it received no attention. But the treatments devoted to it have been brief or narrowly conceived, and they have fragmented the subject by time and focus. Sections of major surveys describe the hidden form. In Hanoteau's massive *Histoire de la nation française* (1925), François Reboul spent 130 pages on "les armées du *grand siècle*," and in the first tome of the new *Histoire militaire de France* (1991), André Corvisier and Anne Blanchard between them wrote 180 pages on the period from 1598 to 1715. Both of these general coverages are typical of their eras, the first emphasizing the nuts and bolts of military technology and organization while detailing specific campaigns, and the second more driven by the modern French preoccupation with the social details of military institutions. But while they differ profoundly, they share the same brevity.

To these overviews must be added a few rare and dated classic studies with narrower focuses. Here, biographies have dominated, and those of Louvois and Le Tellier say a great deal about the state of scholarship on the army. Camille Rousset's four-volume *Histoire de Louvois* provides a detailed account of that famous war minister, an account unequaled by any subsequent work; Corvisier's more recent *Louvois* (1983) can be best regarded as a readable abridgment of Rousset. Scholars still must use the *Histoire de Louvois* as their best source, yet it was published in 1862–64. What other field of history would attract so little modern work that historians must still constantly appeal to a study well over a century old? Much the same is true for Louis André, *Michel Le Tellier et l'organisation de l'armée monarchique*, a crucial piece of scholarship that appeared in 1906. To these biographies must be added lives of major military commanders, such as Condé, Turenne, Vauban, and Villars. Two brief descriptions of the French army at particular moments also provide points of reference, the short volume by Victor Belhomme, *L'armée française en 1690*, and H. Pichat's article, "Les Armées de Louis XIV en 1674," but again, regardless of their merits, these efforts, both by professional military officers, date back to 1895 and 1910, respectively. The dates tell the story; the historiography of the army has grown weak with old age. With few exceptions, modern "war and society" additions have been too narrow, esoteric, or tangential to reinvigorate the subject as a whole.

If scholarship on the army suffers from being both sparse and aged, it is

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also disjointed. The seventeenth-century brought constant and important evolution in military institutions and practices, but attempts to study this change only through examinations that deal with it during a short time span distort its coherent and often gradual nature. Perhaps such distortion comes as a nearly unavoidable byproduct of the emphasis on biographies, since such works try to encompass a major subject within the decades of an individual's active life. Biography not only encapsulates history; the biographer tends to champion his or her subject. This is certainly the case for studies of Le Tellier and Louvois, and the same can be said for treatments of French affairs under the Richelieu administration. Such segmented approaches, instead of dealing with the military in a more continuous fashion, worry too much about which minister deserves the prize as the most important innovator.

Recently, a few historians have turned to the army as a subject of study once again, yet while they have supplied more pieces to the puzzle, they have yet to assemble the whole. David Parrott's dissertation, "The Administration of the French Army During the Ministry of Cardinal Richelieu," while superb, only covers the years 1635–37 in detail. A conference held in 1985, "La présence de la guerre au XVIIe siècle," and a two-volume set, *Guerre et paix dans l'Europe du XVIIe siècle* (1991), may mark something of a renaissance in the subject. Doubtless, the efforts of Corvisier, Blanchard, and others have been admirable, but they are limited by a desire to deal with the military past in a way acceptable to current fashions in historical scholarship. Attempts to deal with the army within the parameters of contemporary historiographical themes most often stress the army exclusively as a social institution and neglect or even deny its essence. Ultimately, armies are for fighting, and they define themselves in combat and in preparation for combat. But in his discussion of French military history between 1598 and 1715, in *Histoire militaire de France*, André Corvisier devotes only 5 of his 140 pages to weapons and tactics, a subject that will take up several chapters here. He and other current historians seem fascinated by such questions as the Invalides and prisoners of war, topics that are marvelously off the point most of the time, since pensioners and prisoners have ceased to be involved in the primary combat duties of the army. It may be part of the soldier's life, but it is not the "military experience" but the military itself that most needs attention. There is no question that old-line military historians gave too little concern to the common soldier, and if the field is to heed John Keegan's challenge to paint the true face of battle, it must become more inclusive. But modern treatments of military institutions seem to err in the other direction.

Another problem associated with current studies of the army is that they stress the impact of war – both the human cost of conflict and the influence of war on state formation – without coming to grips with the institutions of warfare. As always, dealing immediately with consequence without adequate knowledge of process can result in error. This is particularly obvious in discussions of state formation, the most exciting and promising line of inquiry intertwined with the history of war and armies. Studies with this focus too

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often base their conclusions about the origins and nature of Bourbon absolutism on an imperfect understanding of the army of the *grand siècle*. In a typical example, the generally fine book Bruce D. Porter's, *War and the rise of the state* (1994), is at its weakest when discussing the France of Louis XIV. In this case, the fault lies not so much with the author, who tried to use the best available scholarship, as with that scholarship itself, which is outdated and limited. It is hard not to agree with David Kaiser, another student of state formation, who complains, "we lack any really systematic studies of [Louis XIV's] armies."²

THE APPROACH AND GOALS OF THIS VOLUME

In *Giant of the Grand Siècle*, I hope to provide that needed systematic study. This volume accepts the army of the *grand siècle* as the main player of the piece, not as a minor character hovering in the background. Placing the army in the preeminent role does not reflect a moral judgment, for the army will be alternately hero and villain; instead it results from a recognition of the military's great importance.

In order to reveal the army's outline and character as never before, this volume examines a broad range of material over an extended period of time. Only a comprehensive method that explores the subject in both its breadth and depth can expose interrelationships and trace developments – the classic issues of continuity and change. While this is the fundamental goal, it feeds into other purposes. Once achieved, an understanding of interrelationships and developments redefines the part played by the army in grander historical dramas.

Failure to consider different levels of military institutions in a single study has led to misconceptions even by the finest scholars. For example, historians and political scientists who concern themselves with state formation posit a direct one-to-one relationship between military expansion and bureaucratization and centralization; it seems reasonable because larger armies must have required that the central government collect and disburse more resources to support those forces. But this fundamental assumption fares badly in these pages, where it will be demonstrated that the army was not financed and administered from the center of power alone. The army also drew heavily upon provincial sources of funding and, consequently, answered to institutions and personnel based in the provinces, not in Paris. In addition, individual field armies provided their own logistical systems, usually through private contractors, and collected money and goods for their own needs on campaign. Furthermore, at the lowest level, regimental officers, notably colonels and captains, contributed their own wealth and credit to the maintenance of their units and carried out many supply and support functions that today

² David Kaiser, *Politics and War* (Cambridge, MA: 1990), 153.

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would fall to a central administration. With four different levels of finance and control, the relationship between army growth and state formation is far more complex and diffuse than current scholarship realizes.

Seeing things over too short a time period can be as damaging as trying to limit the range of institutions and practices considered. In his classic, and generally excellent, study of Le Tellier as secretary of state for war, Louis André credits Le Tellier with turning away from private contractors for logistical support and providing instead “direct service by the state.”³ But André could only claim this because he did not look further than the career of Le Tellier. Later, under Louis XIV, supply by private contractors, *munitionnaires*, again became the rule. What André described as a forward-looking innovation was, it will be seen, only a catch-as-catch-can response to a financial breakdown that forced contractors to abandon the army. Only in taking the long view can the contribution of each minister be set in its proper place. More careful examination reveals not an administrative revolution at any one point, but a steady evolution in administrative practice and power from the early seventeenth century into the 1690s at least.

Weighing change and continuity in the army of the *grand siècle* interjects this book into the historiographical discussion of the Military Revolution. At times, this theoretical debate turns into a search for some magic technology that transformed war and armies. For Geoffrey Parker, it is the *trace italienne* fortress, while Jeremy Black emphasizes the introduction of the bayonet that relegated the pike to the status of an historical relic. This volume rejects both assertions and others in favor of an evolutionary path not driven by technological innovation but by conceptual and institutional development.

By covering so much territory through an inclusive and integrated approach, this book not only describes the army of the *grand siècle* and contributes to present-day scholarly dialogue, but it can provide a starting point for other studies. Perhaps it can serve as both an encyclopedia of detail and as a baseline of interpretation. If so, these pages could be of value for investigations yet to be conceived and debates yet to be joined.

To fulfill its promise of revealing the features of the giant to all, this volume must serve a variety of readers, from French historians knowledgeable about the chronology, personalities, and institutions of the *grand siècle*, to military specialists less well informed about these matters but steeped in the details of military technology, tactics, and practices. To explain the subject to one audience requires supplying information already familiar to another. Each individual reader ought to bear in mind this need to cover what he or she may regard as assumed. By the same token, an expert in a particular field of study may desire more discussion on that area than this volume presents, but because the volume takes on a wide spectrum of time and material,

³ Louis André, *Michel Le Tellier et l'organisation de l'armée monarchique* (Paris: 1906), 434. In a later work, *Michel Le Tellier et Louvois* (Paris: 1942), André did consider a broader time span, but his first book is still the classic.

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it cannot examine each topic in all its complexity. The importance of the subject requires that this work reach out to different audiences and that it be cast in broad terms, and the benefits of this approach more than compensate for any shortcomings it entails.

SKETCHING THE IMAGE

Before beginning the long and complicated task of painting a full portrait of the giant, a brief sketch of his features can serve as a guide. Begin with the four most prominent features of the subject: the transition in army style from aggregate contract to state commission, the tremendous growth of the army, the limitations put on performance and policy by financial constraints, and the evolutionary character of military change other than army expansion. The French army, particularly its infantry, had once been an aggregate of temporary mercenary units and private forces raised by *grands*, but by the mid-1600s, it had become the province of the king alone, a royal instrument with a large permanent establishment directly commanded by the monarch. This new style of army then expanded to unprecedented size. When France entered the Thirty Years' War, the army swelled to proportions too large for the state to support and control, and troops became predatory on French society. Later growth during the personal reign of Louis XIV did not cause such turmoil, but in a financial sense, the Bourbon state never grew into its army. As a consequence, administration and supply were conducted in ways that most conveniently, though often inefficiently, mobilized credit. The need to turn to financial expedients hamstrung administrative reform. Lack of adequate funding and the multi-tiered form of administration explains the evolutionary pace of administrative reform while army growth made revolutionary leaps. Even in this environment, however, military administration made great strides in regularizing the supply of food, clothing, equipment, and armament as never before.

The officer corps reflected a unique culture of command based upon aristocratic values that attracted young nobles to the service but limited the professionalization of the army. On the regimental and company level, Louvois encouraged practices and institutions designed to increase the competence of officers, but his efforts ran afoul of the need to commission rich men because their wealth and credit were required for the proper maintenance of their units. Once again the financial straits of the government set limits to the extent of reform. However, Louis XIV was able to curb the arrogant independence of his generals through such measures as the *ordre de tableau*, which established seniority as the principle.

Men from the lower reaches of society supplied the rank and file, who shared little in common with their aristocratic officers. Common soldiers were not expected to display great commitment or initiative, although the promise of better care for the wounded and veterans was designed to bind the soldier more to the state and to encourage enlistments. Ostensibly voluntary

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enlistment provided most of the recruits; however, recruiters often employed deceit and violence to fill their quotas. The need for manpower in the last two of Louis's wars inspired the creation of a provincial militia system to conscript men into the ranks. This device was not meant and did not operate as a replacement for voluntary enlistment; instead it was an expedient required to build an army larger than could have been assembled through traditional means.

Tactically, the French did not experience a radical Military Revolution during the *grand siècle*. To a large degree, tactics changed only incrementally because they rested upon unaltered assumptions concerning the limited reliability of the rank and file. Infantry armament and tactics altered as the French integrated Dutch and Swedish advances and, most importantly, adopted drill. Fusils gradually replaced muskets, while pikes gave ground before firearms until the bayonet eliminated the pike altogether. Cavalry weapons and practices remained remarkably stable throughout the century. Artillery also changed surprisingly little, although it had the chance to benefit from important improvements in cannon design. At midcentury, the French represented the highest levels of tactical competence, but by the War of the Spanish Succession, they had probably slipped behind the English and the Dutch.

Operationally, the French came to avoid battle and embrace siege warfare. The seventeenth century brought a conception of battle as a test of will and order, in which it seemed more important to absorb casualties without breaking than it was to inflict losses on the enemy. This style of forbearance in combat emphasized the costly nature of battle, and this, combined with the indecisive character of most combat in the field, led Louis, his advisors, and his generals to prefer siege operations. Thanks to the genius and energy of Vauban, the French mastered fortress construction and siege warfare as did no other power in Europe. Fortifications and siege warfare also became so important because fortresses controlled territory that could be exploited for money and material while fortifications denied these resources to the enemy. Thus, the fact that the state never mastered the ability to pay for its own army underlay operational and strategic decisions. The state's own flaws tethered the giant.

In one sense, it is surprising that a volume like this has taken so long to appear, yet in another, this may be a book too soon. The effort is both necessary and necessarily incomplete: necessary because the topic is too important to remain without a general overview, and necessarily incomplete because so few detailed studies exist to supply the basis for synthesis. The highest goal of such an undertaking is not simply to spread knowledge, but rather to convince others of the value of the topic and the need for further work. Ultimately, if this book is successful, it will stimulate the studies that will make it obsolete in the future. It is scholarship on a suicide mission.

Acknowledgments

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Parts of this volume have appeared as journal articles or as chapters. Much of Chapter 2 appeared in *French Historical Studies* as “Recalculating French Army Growth During the *Grand siècle*, 1610–1715,” and the majority of Chapter 6 first saw light in the *Journal of Modern History* as “How War Fed War: The Tax of Violence and Contributions During the *grand siècle*.” Chapters 14 and 15 make use of material and text that first appeared in “Tactical Evolution in the French Army, 1560–1660,” published in *French Historical Studies*. Important sections of Chapter 16 come from “The *trace italienne* and the Growth of Armies: the French Case,” from the *Journal of Military History* and “Food, Funds, and Fortresses: Resource Mobilization and Positional Warfare in the Campaigns of Louis XIV,” an essay in my *Feeding Mars: Logistics in Western Warfare from the Middle Ages to the Present*.

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