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# Introduction

The aim of this book is to examine the rise, success and transformations of military enterprise – warfare organized and waged by private contractors – in early modern Europe (*c*.1500–1700). Military enterprise as it is discussed here amounts to a lot more than hiring mercenaries to serve in the ranks of a state-run army or using privateers to supplement or stand in for the state's navy. Enterprise includes a more extensive delegation of responsibility and authority to include the supply of food, clothes and equipment to troops, and the manufacturing and distribution of munitions and weapons. Warship and fortress building were outsourced, as were entire naval operations. Garrisoning and siege-works were put out to contract. A large part of this process did involve the hiring and maintenance of soldiers or sailors, but the terms of many of the recruitment contracts drawn up with the field and unit commanders reveal significant differences from those before or after this period. Moreover the way in which these commanders interpreted their authority and autonomy in waging war on behalf of their employers was significantly changed. They acted through their own creditors to raise the funds required for recruitment and military operations, and they drew on networks of private manufacturers, merchants and transport operatives to ensure that their troops were fed and equipped. Some fundamental aspects of the financing of war were placed in the hands of private military contractors or their agents, who also ensured that their credit and costs were recovered, by force if necessary, even when the army was on the territory of its notional employer.

To anyone familiar with the historical debate about early modern military change, it will be significant that the key decades of this 'military devolution' lie between *c*.1560 and 1660, the same period identified by Michael Roberts in his seminal article for the chronology of an early modern European 'military revolution'.[1] From its inception in the mid-1950s, this thesis that military change could be linked to wider processes of political and social transformation has been the key organizing principle for analysis and discussion of early modern war and society.[2] Although



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mercenaries, military enterprise and private contracting are mentioned in many discussions of early modern military revolution, their significance seems rarely to have been fully accepted or appreciated. Whatever its scale and however central it may have been to early modern military activity, privatization remains in most of these accounts a peripheral issue or a historical dead-end. A central aim of the present study is to present a much more extensive and forceful case for the significance of military privatization, and to subject the concept of military revolution, indeed the whole case for early modern military discontinuity and change, to scrutiny from a different perspective. How does the 'business of war' fit with arguments that have explicitly or implicitly assumed that war should be the business of the state?

Underpinning the argument of this book is a simple proposition: the maintenance of wholly state-recruited and state-administered military force is an anomalous development over the broader course of European history. An explicit drive to establish fully state-controlled armies and navies, and the maintenance of a closely controlled monopoly of force, is a particular preoccupation of European states from roughly 1760 to 1960. It emerged as a result of a distinctive set of political and industrial developments which altered both the character and scale of warfare, and demanded a level of military participation and economic commitment which could no longer be met through adjusting and developing the traditional mechanisms of organizing and waging war. A contentious account of this development might suggest that it began with the early writings of Jacques de Guibert, wrestling with the implications of the radically increased killing power of mid-eighteenth-century warfare for traditional, long-service, highly drilled *ancien régime* armies.[3] Its ending was marked in western states with the recognition during the 1950s and 1960s that nuclear weapons had profoundly changed the patterns of future warfare, and that the creation of mass, conscripted armies via national service was militarily redundant – even if political imperatives led to its retention in many states for a few decades longer.

The characteristic pattern of European warfare from the world of the Greek city-states to the *ancien régime* of the eighteenth century, and once again during the past half-century down to the present day, is military organization on the basis of contracts with private suppliers, whether these are for the recruitment and maintenance of fighting soldiers, for the provision of military hardware and munitions, or for military support systems. This rarely means total military devolution, more often what could be described as varying forms of public–private partnership, in which often very substantial elements of private contracting, finance and administration are present. Most European (and very many

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non-European) military organizations have been built on, or were at least substantially underpinned by, arrangements which delegated or transferred military responsibilities from the aegis of the state into the hands of private individuals, groups or organizations, some of whom were subjects of the state, some outsiders.

On a bare overview of the evidence, this contention is hardly controversial. From Xenophon and the ten thousand Greek mercenaries who entered Persian service in 401 BC,[4] through to the auxiliaries who dominated the military system of the later Roman Empire,[5] to the 'great companies' who shaped the military and political environment of the later fourteenth century,[6] through to Executive Outcomes, Kellogg, Brown & Root, and Blackwater,[7] the ubiquity of contracted, privately organized military force and support services is not in doubt. In most societies and states the deployment and maintenance of military force occupies a large space, a part of which can be filled by private military contracting.

At issue though, and fundamental to the concerns of this study, is the way in which this military reality has been perceived, both by contemporary commentators in these societies and by historians, and in particular by historians of early modern Europe. For the most part, the western military tradition has been interpreted in ways which downplay or deny this basic reality. Ever-increasing state control of military force, building towards a 'monopoly of violence', is treated as the essential long-term historical process; the use of private military initiatives, organization and finance – for the most part lumped together as war fought by 'mercenaries' – is treated as a historical dead-end.[8] A narrative is established in which, if the existence, and sometimes even the expansion, of a private role in military organization is conceded, this is nonetheless seen as marginal, largely irrelevant to an understanding of the real path of military-political relations in early modern and modern Europe. It is noteworthy that in contrast to the vast literature generated by historians and social scientists on military force and the rise of the state, the only general and chronologically wide-ranging studies of privatized warfare are intended for a broad, popular readership.[9]

It was easy to maintain such an emphasis when the final outcome of the historical process appeared so visibly to be the establishment of national armed forces, fully and comprehensively controlled by the state. Up to the mid-twentieth century it was possible – focusing always on the western military tradition, of course – to postulate an 'end of military history' in which the defining characteristic of modern military force was its structural integration with the state's administration, a process that seemed both complete and irreversible. However, military developments over the

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past few decades have called this seemingly inexorable process into question. The relationship between military force and the demands and aspirations of states and their governments no longer seems so one-directional. Awareness that the outsourcing of military functions, and dependence on private companies to fulfil vital ancillary and support services, is an increasing part of most western military organizations has taken a while to grow among non-specialists.[10] More attention was focused on the resurgence of private military companies and their operations on the fringes of the military system, whether this was the comprehensive small armies fielded by companies like Executive Outcomes and Sandline in south-central Africa in the 1980s and early 1990s, or the growth from the 1990s of private security companies in zones of crisis, whose activities may well extend to proactive behaviour replicating or replacing the work of state-run armed forces.[11] The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have provided further evidence of the growing activities of private security companies whose remit to provide military support services can on occasions shade into de facto combat roles: during the past decade Blackwater has become a virtual household name thanks to its massive presence in Iraq and the involvement of its operatives in combat zones.[12] The scale and the media profile of military outsourcing in these last two wars has finally brought home to a wider public how radical the transformation has been over the past few decades. While in the West, what could be defined as the 'core activities' of the armed forces have so far remained directly under state control, this is not the case elsewhere in the world, and it is certainly arguable that in the West the ability to perform these core activities has already become dependent upon support services which are in large part put out to contract.[13]

So thinking about the organization of military force in the early twenty-first century and beyond renders more controversial the notion that there was a single historical path leading to the creation of a monopoly of military force in the hands of the state (indeed, that the historical process had reached that point by the late nineteenth century in even the most backward of western nations). But it was never the case that this paradigm for the understanding of European military history rested purely and simply on an assumption of historical inevitability. Other no less problematic assumptions play their part in shaping views of the development of military force in early modern Europe.

If historians of early modern Europe have interpreted changing patterns of warfare from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century in terms of the growth and elaboration of state control, a significant element of this is based on what is taken to be the axiomatic inferiority of private military organization. Two sets of interlocking negative assumptions are at work here. The first of these is a generalized, but well-established, moral and

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legal preoccupation with the use of soldiers whose activities seem to have no justification other than the pursuit of personal gain. In some cases this is made evident because the soldiers or sailors had taken service with a foreign state, and had no obvious interest or engagement in the quarrels of the contracting power. Against the obvious argument that many native soldiers have a demonstrably limited commitment to the causes for which they are fighting, the counter-argument is made that these native soldiers were at least recruited within a societal context in which this cause was considered an appropriate justification for war. Mercenaries, on the other hand, choose their military service entirely freely and individually, and for their own motives; they were neither conscripted by the state to service in a cause judged appropriate, nor were they responding collectively to a wider perception of that cause. Underlying these rather clumsy definitional arguments is a widely shared assumption about the fundamental wrongness of 'killing for hire': mercenaries have less plausible justifications for their activities than a national army. Even where one side in a dispute might reasonably assert that they possessed a just cause in defending their interests through war, that cause would be demeaned by relying on hired mercenaries to wage a struggle on their behalf since these would be unable to provide a plausible justification for their own part in any consequent violence. The free and inappropriate choice of soldiering for profit will consistently trump any evidence that the mercenary, as individual, may sympathize with the ideals, beliefs or cause of the party for whom he is fighting and that this may in part have motivated the decision to offer his services.[14]

In the West from the early nineteenth century this moral sense of the wrongness of fighting for profit has combined on occasions with a political interest in the containment of private force, to produce a legal framework for restrictions on hiring 'mercenaries' and enforceable international agreements to stamp out piracy or to restrict privateering.[15] But such attempted legal restraints, highly problematic in terms of definitions and possibilities of enforcement, are a recent development. Sarah Percy in her latest book points to the less substantial but more pervasive notion of a shared, historical 'norm' against mercenary use. Starting with the reactions to the unconstrained looting and violence of the private mercenary companies of the fourteenth century, and enduring concern about violence outside the legitimate control of constituted authorities, she traces a developing consensus, established well before an eighteenth-century Enlightenment, that the hiring of military forces was inappropriate to a civilized society.[16] Whether seen through the eyes of theorists who worried about the moral impact of depriving the citizenry of the need to serve in their own defence, or through the eyes of political and social elites,

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concerned at the potential disorders that would result from allowing adult males to seek their living by fighting for hire outside their own homeland, a shared thread of hostility to and constraint in the use of mercenaries is a persistent characteristic of western societies down to the present day. Both humanist and Enlightenment discourses lay stress on the importance of citizen participation in military service, and identify this as a mark of civility and progress. Abandoning reliance on mercenaries (which, of course, can easily encompass the whole structure of privatized warfare) is part of a civilizing process; the state-controlled army reflects the achievement of moral and political maturity.

Of course, the practical problem of who constitutes a mercenary remains: the graveyard of most anti-mercenary legislation has been the difficulty of finding any kind of workable definition; neither being non-native in the country of employment nor offering military service exclusively for financial reward proves very effective. Private forces standing totally outside the control of the state identify only a minuscule subset of activity which might broadly be considered mercenary. In this context, the advantage of understanding the hostility to mercenary use as a 'norm' rather than an evolving body of international legislation is precisely that it bypasses these issues and argues for a much longer-term, collective aversion at a political and cultural level. Indeed Percy argues that it is the very strength of the anti-mercenary norm which makes it virtually impossible to legislate effectively against mercenarism.[17] But this legislative failure does not weaken a widely shared set of beliefs and assumptions, generating a consensus that in practice leads to restrictions on the hiring of military force, or which reinforces moral hostility to its use.

The obvious point about the anti-mercenary norm is that it is enduring and pervasive, but not susceptible to objective cost-benefit analysis: the hiring of mercenaries is always wrong and undesirable, even when the military alternatives will prove less effective in saving the state from external defeat or internal fragmentation.[18] States seeking to use the services of external military forces betray their own organizational weakness by such use, and by challenging the norm will reinforce an external perception of their lack of civility, and the low level of their political and social organization.

If this moral disapproval of the use of mercenaries forms one part of the picture, it is reinforced by an equally powerful but pragmatic conviction that the contracting-out of warfare is militarily self-defeating. The application of military force should only be entrusted to those whose loyalty can be ensured by shared national identity and allegiance. The 'citizen army' idealized by Machiavelli and cohorts of humanist and then nationalist thinkers is contrasted with its apparent obverse, the mercenary soldier

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who serves only for money and outside territorial and ideological affiliations. The national soldier, fighting for country and family, has everything to lose by showing limited military commitment; the mercenary has only a service contract, on which he can renege with no more than financial consequences. As such, it is assumed he *must* be unreliable in his allegiance and half-hearted in his motivation. If a better financial offer were to be made by the enemy, the logical behaviour for the mercenary would be to accept it; the adoption of a decisive strategy involving hard-fought battles with heavy casualties would be entirely contrary to the interests of mercenary soldiers and their captains, whose own interests would dictate drawn-out, expensive but indecisive conflict which would keep them in employment for as long as possible. Both explicitly and implicitly much writing about warfare picks up on these assumptions; even if it is granted that mercenaries may, through length of service or organizational expertise, have acquired particular military strengths and skills, these will be counterbalanced by the deliberately limited nature of their service and commitment. When mercenaries are hired en masse, it is no less axiomatic that their captains, who have entered into military activity for profit rather than for honour or duty, will seek to hire at the lowest cost compatible with keeping the unit in being. In some medieval and early modern cases of poor, resource-limited territories like Switzerland or Scotland this pressure for cheapness may matter less: the soldiers will still be raised on the basis of landed ties and other local connections which may give them a high level of cohesion. But elsewhere mercenary recruitment could easily mean acquiring soldiers or sailors who were the social detritus of urban and rural life, lacking in resilience as well as group identity, and unmotivated by any military objective except plunder.

No amount of contrary evidence about the fighting commitment and effectiveness of mercenaries in particular military circumstances will change what seems, from one perspective, a set of logical assumptions about their limitations as military operators. This in turn reinforces a view of mercenaries as a worst option, to be adopted only by states for which no better alternative exists, whether because of fiscal or administrative incapacity, or through the weakness and corruption of a central regime. No rational state or its ruler would choose such an ineffectual and unreliable military system if other options were available.

The elision of these two negative arguments against private military force makes a powerful rhetorical case. Indeed the combination of moral repugnance with a 'common-sense' conviction that mercenaries make bad and disloyal troops has been repeated so frequently that the counter-productiveness of relying on private contractors can appear self-evident: a

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genuine discussion about the merits and demerits of relying on private sources of military force goes by default. And although the original assertions were about the hiring and use of mercenary soldiers, the same strictures can be projected on to areas like maritime privateering, and ancillary services such as the contracted provision of weaponry, munitions and food supplies to military forces.

However, a negative assessment of the morality and practice of military privatization is not the sole nor the most important reason for the marginal role that it is allocated in accounts of war and society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Various positive modes of thinking seem no less incompatible with the idea that states might consistently and deliberately have relied upon or even expanded the outsourcing of military functions into the hands of private enterprisers. The most important of these is the extended body of writing on state-formation and the building of the modern state, and the various ways in which this is linked to warfare and the pressures of war. It is fundamental to the argument of the present book that there is no necessary incompatibility between the growth of the power of the state and the development of a substantial sphere of private military activity; indeed, the latter made possible a robustness and organizational 'reach' that would otherwise have been unattainable to government authorities. This argument will be developed in the ensuing chapters. But it is no less important to note that public and private authority have frequently been seen as directly opposed, and to have existed in a zero-sum game where a gain to one must represent an equivalent loss to the other.[19] If one of the defining characteristics of the modern state is the possession of a monopoly of legitimate violence over all those subjects residing under its authority, it is easily assumed that the monopoly can only be exercised directly through the state's agents, duly organized and sustained by resources controlled by the state. The origins of this definition of state-formation as achieving a narrowly defined monopoly of force, rather than, say, the successful co-option of both internal and outside resources and skills to create a multi-faceted system of authority, is deeply entrenched in a series of implicit assumptions about state competition and the growth of state power.[20] These assumptions date back to the nineteenth century, but continue to cast a long shadow over many areas of early modern political and institutional history, and ensure that the use of military force raised outside the direct control of the state is treated as marginal, and essentially irrelevant to the account of the rise of the state.

The link between military power, the growth of the state and the establishment of national identity was one of the great themes of nineteenth-century history. It was above all characteristic of an entire

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school of nationalist German historians, for whom the history of the rise of Brandenburg-Prussia was axiomatically the history of Germany, and, from the 1860s, no less axiomatically the history of Europe. For a historian like Johann Gustav Droysen, the Prussian experience demonstrated that war was both the test and the catalyst of the growth of the state and the achievement of nationhood: Brandenburg-Prussia had risen from being a minor power and military victim during the Thirty Years War, to a state which was to become the arbiter of German and European politics. It had done so, although a small and under-resourced group of territories, by systematically building up military force over a century from the 1640s to 1740s. Unwilling to submit to the political humiliations and economic depredations that would stem from renewed military dependence on the major powers, a sequence of Electors, then kings, in Prussia, focused their attentions and the resources of their territories on creating a permanent military force of a size and capability comparable with European powers who possessed hugely superior resources. The story of the rise of Prussia could be turned into the account of how, by eschewing the courtly and cultural indulgence of other German rulers and by squeezing every fiscal resource through unprecedented administrative efficiency, a permanent army of 80,000 troops could be created by 1740, and could in turn be expanded in a succession of mid-eighteenth-century wars which firmly established Prussia as a great power in its own right.[21] The centrality of the army as the purpose and justification for every aspect of governmental policy and every administrative initiative was undisputed: the very structure of society was organized around the militarization of the landowning nobility and the organization of a large proportion of the male labouring population in an annual cycle which alternated agricultural and military service. In fact a permanent army on this scale was only viable on the basis of hiring at least some of its troops from outside Prussian borders: Frederick the Great sardonically referred to his grandfather, Frederick I, as the ‘mercenary king’ for his willingness both to contract foreign troops and then to hire them out to the Emperor. But for the historians of the Prussian state, this was a necessary evil, justified, as it was at the time, since it protected the economic capacity of the native population.[22] Moreover such mercenary units were tamed and fully integrated by the Prussian military model of drill, discipline and control, easily reduced to component parts in the clockwork of a smoothly running military organization. They did nothing to detract from the military model which saw an ideal synthesis of state, administration and army, so that even the desire to spare some subjects from military service was, paradoxically, simply to harness better the resources needed to sustain the army.

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Prussian historians who saw the rise of the state and the rise of the state-controlled army as synonymous were especially strident: relating military prowess and the mobilization of military resources to survival and national success in war produced a crude – modernization or extinction – mantra which fitted well with the triumphalist assumptions of a post-1870 Germany. Its emulators, amongst whom were historians of other German states, and, for example, nineteenth-century French administrative historians, were no less prepared to see in military force the rationale for the growth of the state. If historians of seventeenth-century France did not present Cardinal Richelieu or Louis XIV as single-mindedly obsessed with the building of a powerful, effective army, this nonetheless figures extensively in most accounts of the 'rise of absolutism' via which the history of French state-building was cast.[23] Moreover the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars saw the French citizen army not merely as the product of a second stage of state-formation, but as a triumphant embodiment of the nation in arms.[24]

Much of this celebration of armies and state-building might seem overly specific, above all, shaped by the particular case of Brandenburg-Prussia, and the circumstances of the creation of the Second Reich in 1871. But crucially for its enduring success, this relationship between military power and the rise of the state was analysed from early on through more comprehensive and nuanced studies, which crossed the borders between history and the social sciences. Max Weber's analysis of the rise of bureaucracy as a stage in state-formation devoted much attention to the Prussian experience of a militarized administration in which the bureaucratic model could be developed within a disciplined context of contiguous civil and military hierarchies. Military necessity – the requirements of creating and sustaining military force – is the strongest factor in the evolution of bureaucratic process and the development of state power through rational administration.[25] Even more than Weber, Otto Hintze's essays, again in many cases concerned with the history of Brandenburg-Prussia, examine much wider conceptual questions relating to European political and constitutional change from the seventeenth into the eighteenth century.[26] For Hintze, the requirement to create and maintain a permanent army was the key to determining the construction and character of the state, providing a detailed explanation of its structure and functioning.[27] The political identity of the state developed under external military pressure, pressure which forced the hands of governments and their administrators in ways which would challenge existing political structures and consensus. Where Hintze moved the discussion beyond the Prussian school was in refusing to see this process in terms of historical specificities – the particular geopolitics of Brandenburg; the ambitions or

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