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978-0-521-57273-6 - Giant of the Grand Siecle: The French Army, 1610-1715

John A. Lynn

Excerpt

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PART ONE

CONTEXT AND PARAMETERS



I

*Contexts of Military Change
in the Grand Siècle*

THE classical façade of Versailles faces the gardens decorated with statues and fountains, traversed by gravel paths. Walking through those gardens, watching the fountains play – if you are lucky enough to be there when they do – and glancing back at the palace, it is hard not to think of Racine and Molière, *Le Vau* and *Le Nôtre*, or Lully and Charpentier – hard not to be impressed with the glory of the *grand siècle*. But at the same time, Versailles is too massive, too overwhelming to be graceful. Versailles symbolizes something other than the culture of the *grand siècle*; it is more about power than about art. Carved trophies of arms with helmets and weapons stand at attention along the roof line, as if to announce that Versailles arose as much from the victories of armies as from the inspiration of architects.

The *grand siècle*, for all its glittering accomplishments, was, at base, a century of war. Considering only the major conflicts that afflicted France, over half of the calendar years from 1610 through 1715 witnessed either interstate or civil war; and if minor conflicts are added in, the proportion rises to three quarters. The primary force of the Bourbons was their army, since except for brief periods the French proved unable or unwilling to maintain a great fleet. The army grew to overshadow all other institutions of the monarchy in size and in appetite. So the record of the seventeenth century remains incomplete without the history of the army; few who walked the paths at Versailles 300 years ago would have disputed that fact.

In order to be understood properly, this description of the giant of the *grand siècle* should be considered in at least four contexts. The first is most theoretical and places French military development on a scale of army evolution for over a millennium. Changes within the army during the seventeenth century ought not to be seen as isolated developments but as part of an important military evolution that affected both France and the rest of Europe. The second context concerns the evolution not of military institutions, but of internal and international conflict during the early modern era, 1495–1815. The *grand siècle* witnessed a transition in the intensity of warfare;

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Europe endured a horribly destructive series of wars before 1660, but after 1660 the character of warfare moderated to a degree. This moderation both reflected and influenced the evolution of armies.

The third necessary context is the narrative of French wars, 1610–1715, that provides the background for all that is discussed in this volume. An account of those conflicts must precede materials presented in the following chapters, for it provides the factual framework of issues, events, and personalities. The fact that French monarchs were unable to pay for this long series of wars not only hamstrung strategy but warped institutional reform; so the fourth context must be fiscal. An understanding of the financial limitations of the Bourbon monarchy is absolutely fundamental to any intelligent discussion of military development during the *grand siècle*. The army related to financial restrictions both as effect and as cause – effect in that inadequate resource mobilization shaped the army, and cause in that the appetite of war defined the financial needs of the state.

THE EVOLUTION OF ARMIES, 800–2000

The army of the *grand siècle* should not be portrayed as static; on the contrary, it carried out one of the fundamental transitions of military history. To appreciate the significance of that transition, the army's institutional development is best considered as part of a long-term evolution in army style across Europe. Unfortunately, there is a tendency to talk of the army of the *ancien régime* as if it were of one mold from Louis XIII, or at least from Louis XIV, through Louis XVI, changing little more than did the name of the king – the army of the Louis's. However, the army evolved a great deal over the course of the *grand siècle*, and this volume concerns itself, more than anything else, with that change. Once the new French pattern emerged, its influence extended beyond the borders of France, for when victory crowned the Bourbon army as the preeminent force on the continent, it became a new model of military organization and administration throughout Europe.

Recently the nature of military change in early modern Europe has attracted a great deal of attention from historians. Their efforts usually center around some attempt to define a Military Revolution, commonly placing all or part of it in the seventeenth century. Michael Roberts began this quest with a provocative essay forty years ago, and the debate has picked up in recent years, thanks largely to the work of Geoffrey Parker, who recasts the span of his Military Revolution to include three centuries, 1500–1800.¹

¹ Important works on the Military Revolution include the following: Michael Roberts, *The Military Revolution, 1560–1660* (Belfast: 1956); George Clark, *War and Society in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: 1968); Geoffrey Parker, "The 'Military Revolution' 1560–1660 – a Myth?" *Journal of Modern History* 48 (June 1976) and *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500–1800* (Cambridge: 1988). For criticisms of the Roberts and Parker formulations of the theory, see Jeremy Black, *A Military Revolution? Military Change and European Society, 1550–1800* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: 1991) and *European Warfare, 1660–1815*

Theories of a Military Revolution posit a radical change, or a series of radical changes, driven by innovations in weapons technology and tactics, although other factors are also given emphasis from time to time. Parker, for example, lays great stress on sixteenth-century artillery and advances in fortification that yielded a new style, the *trace italienne*, designed to counter cannon in siege warfare.

For a number of reasons, the existing theories of a single or multiple revolutions leave something to be desired. They seem to assume that military development works by great sea changes rather than by more incremental innovations. In addition, the emphasis on technology stresses hardware over conceptions of warfare and other less tangible factors that probably exerted stronger influences over early modern military institutions. Lastly, current theories tend to isolate the early modern experience from the rest of military history.

Without entirely rejecting Roberts's or Parker's visions of change, this volume accepts an alternative theory of the evolution of armies.² It separates the flow of European military history into seven periods defined not by military technology, periods of warfare, or great military personalities but by army style. Sketched in only its most basic outlines, the theory hypothesizes that European armies, and, for the purposes of this work specifically the French, experienced seven stages of evolution since the eighth century A.D. The breaks between one period and the next were neither instant nor absolute. Each stage retained something of the earlier style, and the key elements of the next type of army appeared in rudimentary form before they prevailed; therefore, the process was more evolutionary than revolutionary. Essential elements of army style include recruitment, remuneration, motivation, organization, command, and relationship to society and government. Technology, tactics, and training are also involved, but more as secondary factors. Judged by these criteria, Western armies have passed through seven evolutionary stages since about A.D. 800: feudal, medieval stipendiary, aggregate contract, state commission, popular conscript, mass reserve, and volunteer technical.

Feudal armies were raised by calling up aristocratic landowners who held their property in exchange for a defined term of annual military service, while towns also supported their lords by assembling urban militia. Peasants could also be summoned in accord with older practices that levied all able-bodied men, although the peasantry rarely possessed formidable military skill. Feudalism in France dates from the mid-eighth century, and it spread slowly in France and throughout western Europe. England was not feudalized until

(New Haven, CT: 1994), and John A. Lynn, "The *trace italienne* and the Growth of Armies: the French Case," *Journal of Military History*, July 1991, 297–330. For a collection of essays on the subject, see Cliff Rogers, ed., *The Military Revolution Debate: Readings on the Military Transformation of Early Modern Europe* (Boulder, CO: 1995).

² See John A. Lynn, "The Evolution of Army Style in the Modern West, 800–2000," *International History Review* 18, no. 3 (August 1996), for a discussion of this evolutionary taxonomy.

the conquest by William, and some areas such as the forests and mountains of Switzerland were never thoroughly feudalized. Since warriors could return home after fulfilling a set obligation, often forty days, an army assembled from feudal contingents had the drawback that it could only undertake limited campaigns. Staggering the call-up of feudal levies could mitigate this problem, but it also limited the number of combatants that were in the field at any one time. In addition, the political independence of major lords and even of their lesser vassals made it advantageous to seek an alternative kind of military force.

As early as the twelfth century, a burgeoning money economy, the willingness of feudal contingents to pay money in lieu of actual service, and increased resources in the hands of princes allowed them to hire soldiers either as the core of their armies or as entire forces. Thus, the English during the Hundred Years' War raised professional, paid armies to fight in France. Such medieval stipendiary armies often contained the same kind of men who would have served the king in the older feudal forces, for example, nobles who fought now for pay, booty, and out of a sense of adventure. Many of the older loyalties for the king or other war leader still held, but the commitment to service rested on money payment. At this time, infantry became a more important contingent of European armies as English longbowmen, Gascon crossbowmen, Flemish pikemen, and others hired on. Medieval stipendiary armies could still contain large feudal contingents, particularly when a prince fought on his own lands where he could summon his nobility at the height of a campaign, as did the French during the Hundred Years' War.

The difficulty of using feudal levies far from home, the excellence of paid professional troops, and the growing wealth of European monarchs encouraged them to rely even more on professional mercenaries. In the case of the French monarchy, such mercenaries were not usually subjects of the king, but Swiss, German, Italian, and others. The tendency for French monarchs to rely most heavily upon infantry hired abroad began no later than the reign of Louis XI, who showed a taste for Swiss infantry that would last for centuries. Although the French generally favored their own cavalry, in the Wars of Religion they also hired German horsemen. Armies during the late fifteenth, sixteenth, and early seventeenth centuries were assembled for particular campaigns from a combination of native French units, foreign mercenary bands, and the private armies of major nobles who offered their services in exchange for money or favor. Thus, armies were aggregate in character and built around a core of troops raised by contract, hence the term *aggregate contract army*.

Princes concluded the contracts in question not with individual soldiers but with the leaders of soldier bands, epitomized by the military entrepreneurs who supplied foreign troops. Units hired in this fashion were "off the shelf," arriving already armed, trained, and organized for battle, with their own officers. When the princely paymaster had no need of them any more, they were simply paid off and put back on the shelf until needed again. There

was little need to maintain such expensive troops over the winter, in lulls during wartime, and certainly not between wars. As a result, armies regularly hit peak size, fought a major engagement, and quickly shrank to much smaller proportions. There was little need to maintain a large peacetime force, since the major occupation of that force was simply to garrison a few key fortresses and police the roads. Consider, for example, François I's use of an aggregate contract army in the war that began in 1542. After a series of inconclusive campaigns, the struggle climaxed in a double invasion of France in 1544; an English army under Henry VIII besieged and took Boulogne but did little else, while the main threat came from Charles V, who led an army into eastern France in the late spring. François reacted by contracting for as many as 16,000 Swiss in July, what seems like the last moment, and yet they arrived in time to form the heart of his main army at the camp de Jalons in late August.³ The desire to create French units that mobilized as rapidly as did hired Swiss and Germans may explain François's attempts to create native infantry "legions" with the same off-the-shelf character. However, the quality of the foreign mercenaries was much higher than the far less professional French, and the reliance on foreign infantry remained throughout the sixteenth century.

The next stage in army evolution, labeled as the *state commission army*, emerged in the seventeenth century. Henri IV's plans for mobilization in 1610 still relied heavily upon German and Swiss mercenary units, and during the minor wars of the period 1611–34, Louis XIII repeatedly enlisted the support of private armies raised by trusted aristocratic supporters, such as the duke d'Epemon, eager to gain royal favor. The rationale behind such aggregate practices remained the need to create a field army quickly without maintaining a large and expensive peacetime force in being. But at the start of the war with Spain in 1635, Louis XIII decided not to turn to private French forces anymore, and the days of contract armies drew to an end, with one important exception. Richelieu purchased the services of the entire army led by Bernard of Saxe-Weimar in 1635; the French renewed the agreement with his remaining officers in 1639 after Bernard's death and simply appointed a Frenchman to command in his stead. Aggregate contract armies had produced forces with good technical skill but suspect loyalty. The requirement for even higher levels of technical expertise, the need for far larger armies, and the desire of monarchs to maintain peacetime forces for military and political reasons led to the state commission army.

The transition from aggregate contract to state commission armies required a change in attitudes and expectations concerning mobilization for war. The former could be assembled very rapidly; the latter took some time to come on line and essentially required a larger standing army to provide the core around which to build the wartime force. The king now issued

³ See the discussion of the 1544 campaign in Ferdinand Lot, *Recherches sur les effectifs des armées françaises des Guerres d'Italie aux Guerres de Religion, 1494–1562* (Paris: 1962), 87–114.

commissions to officers, primarily French officers, to raise and train regiments in the king's name in accord with royal ordonnances. Unlike the independent contractors of before, the new units were to be the king's troops, loyal only to him. The regiments that the king commissioned remained in being for extended periods, either throughout a war or even during peacetime. Long-term army expenses probably increased, but the military and political benefits were worth it. The political advantages of this system were at least threefold: the greater loyalty of the army, liberation from dependency on private armies raised by nobles, and the creation of a standing army.⁴

At this time, the French army expanded immensely. An army that hit a theoretical, or paper, high of 80,000 in the sixteenth century reached about 200,000 in the 1630s and expanded even further to about 280,000 in the Dutch War and 420,000 in the Nine Years' War, again as paper strengths. The state commission army also entailed a large peacetime standing army, which grew even more dramatically than wartime forces over the course of the seventeenth century, hitting 165,000 in the 1680s.

Jean Meyer, who has touched on this evolution, characterizes the sixteenth-century form of what I call here the *aggregate contract army* as one in which the actual field force had to be assembled from scratch at the start of each war, because the very small peacetime contingent was completely subsumed by the wartime entity. The state commission army, which Meyer terms an *armée royalisé*, was only made possible by a tremendous growth of the peacetime army that could then serve as a basis for expansion once a conflict had begun. This peacetime force was *royalisé* because it was ingrained with discipline and commanded by an officer corps loyal to the king. For Meyer, this also required the nationalization of the army through recruiting the king's own subjects and the "renobilization" of the officer corps by relying upon the royalty's own aristocracy rather than upon foreign entrepreneurs.⁵

While providing the state with a base for wartime force expansion and a tool for internal coercion, the standing army also stimulated rudimentary military planning. States now needed to make intelligent decisions as to where to station peacetime military forces, and this implied evaluating that state's internal security, its potential enemies, and its future international goals.

To attain the large proportions that the army reached in the seventeenth century required mobilizing every available source of reliable manpower. This explains why foreign units still served in the French army, but they were recruited and trained in the same manner as French units, rather than arriving off-the-shelf. Under Louvois's direction, the French also began to conscript their own peasantry for service in the royal army in 1688, and this practice was resurrected in a somewhat different form in 1701. Conscription never provided the bulk of the army under the *ancien régime*, but it topped

⁴ I must thank my graduate student Brian Sandberg for his contributions through our many discussions on the nature of aggregate contract and state commission armies.

⁵ Jean Meyer, "De la guerre' au XVIIe siècle," *XVII siècle*, 37 (1985), 278-79.

off the volunteer recruitment that supplied most new soldiers. The expanded officer corps provided many posts for a nobility willing, even anxious, to serve in the new army. The monarchy required that these new commissioned officers perform as disciplined servants of the king and established a strict hierarchy even for its general officers. This subordination can be credited to Louvois above all, but it was not simply his work.

This volume mainly tells the story of the way in which the French created the archetypal state commission army, which then became the paradigm for other European land forces. It is not a static story, but one of transition. Nor is it a story of continual French military preeminence, because once the French created the form, they became too set in their ways, and other European forces first met and then surpassed the French in certain important respects.

Looking past the death of Louis XIV, the state commission army remained the pattern until the French Revolution ushered in the form termed here the *popular conscript army*. Conscription which had appeared in the seventeenth century as an ancillary form of recruitment became the norm, first in the *levée en masse* of 1793, but more lastingly through the Jourdan Law of 1798, which set up a regular system of yearly conscription that set the pattern for Europe west of Russia. All soldiers were expected to be loyal to the nation, whereas only personal loyalty to the king was expected before. As it evolved after 1815, the popular conscript army did not place primary emphasis upon reserves, although the Prussians did better with their reserves than did any other power in Europe.

The late nineteenth century brought still a different kind of force, the *mass reserve army*, which relied heavily upon reserve components. No longer the *armée de métier* of the period 1815–70, the peacetime army became a training institution meant to produce numerous reserves that could be mobilized in the first weeks of a major war. While defeat in the Franco-Prussian War drove the French to military reform, they did not adopt the mass reserve army until the 1880s. Huge mass reserve armies of Europe squared off against one another at the start of World War I and World War II.

The postwar world has seen the mass reserve army give way to a final form, the *volunteer technical army*, for both political and military reasons. While European states, most notably France and Germany, supplied the paradigms for the previous army styles, the United States serves as the model for this last stage. Politically, the use of conscript armies in postcolonial wars has proven too costly, as it did for the United States in Vietnam. To American problems in South East Asia should be added the American preference for high-tech weaponry, which though very lethal requires an advanced level of competence to maintain and employ. The result is that a smaller number of self-selected, highly motivated, and highly trained volunteers form a politically more useful and militarily more effective force. With the end of the Cold War, the expenses of maintaining large forces that no longer seem to be necessary will in all likelihood drive other major powers to follow the U.S. example. But this is getting far beyond the story of the *grand siècle*.

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TRANSITIONS IN THE INTENSITY OF
EUROPEAN WARS, 1495–1815

If the French army evolved over the course of the *grand siècle*, so did the intensity of warfare that abated somewhat midway through the seventeenth century. Generations of military historians have claimed that an age of limited warfare lay between the Thirty Years' War and the Wars of the French Revolution, and no historian laid more emphasis on this notion than did John U. Nef in his classic *War and Human Progress*. "For Western Europe as a whole, years of war were still the rule, years of peace the exception. Yet there was more or less continuous moderation in the fierceness of the fighting."⁶ The contention is that after a period of warfare typified by irrational, primarily religious, motivations and fought with little constraint against enemy soldiers and unfortunate civilians alike, war became more rational in its goals and more humane in its conduct. As religion ceased to be a primary motivation, war became more a question of dynastic politics, and regimes fought not to destroy one another but simply for limited territorial or economic gain. At the same time, better military administration relieved the pressures that drove soldiers to prey on towns and villages just to survive, and laws of war regulated the conduct of armies toward civilians. Of course, there were exceptions to the rule, and from time to time armies committed terrible excesses, but in the main, wars became more reasonable in their goals and conduct.

From its earliest formulations, this concept has been attacked. In the European context, critics point to the assault on Prussia during the Seven Years' War, 1756–63, as one designed to eliminate Prussia, not simply to defeat it. And certainly Frederick the Great had to respond by mobilizing his state as completely as he could to fight off the Austrians and the Russians. In addition, warfare along the southern frontier of Hapsburg lands retained its religious dimension and victimized civilians on both sides.

Here it is less important to render a verdict for all of Europe than simply to judge if the period 1610–1715 witnessed a significant shift in the nature and intensity of warfare for France. The historian Jean Meyer goes so far as to talk about a transformation from *guerre totale* during the Thirty Years' War and the war with Spain to *guerre contrôlée* during the wars of Louis XIV.⁷ For Meyer and also for André Corvisier, when Louis XIV seized the reins of government in 1661, he ushered in an era of limited warfare that stretched until the French Revolution again redefined warfare at the close of the eighteenth century. This characterization of warfare in the *grand siècle* cannot be accepted without comment and qualification.

French wars changed in intensity but not in some simple sense of moving

⁶ John U. Nef, *War and Human Progress* (Cambridge, MA: 1950), 155. The period he is discussing is 1640–1740 in a chapter entitled, "Less Blood and More Money."

⁷ Meyer, "De la guerre' au XVIIIe siècle," 278.

Table 1.1. *France at war, 1495–1815.*^a

Period	Total years	War years	Interstate war years	Internal war years
1495–1559	65	50 (76.9%)	48 (73.8%)	3 (4.6%)
1560–1610	51	33 (64.7%)	17 (33.3%)	28 (54.9%)
1611–60	50	41 (82.0%)	30 (60.0%)	21 (42.0%)
1661–1715	55	36 (65.5%)	36 (65.5%)	6 (10.9%)
1716–88	73	31 (42.5%)	31 (42.5%)	0 (0%)
1789–1815	27	23 (85.2%)	23 (85.2%)	4 (14.8%)

^aIn this table, if a war consumed any part of a given year, it is counted as a war year; thus, the Nine Years' War, 1688–97, is calculated here as involving ten years.

from “total war” to “controlled war.” In order to judge a transformation in warfare during the *grand siècle*, the periods that preceded and followed it need to be included in the picture; this means considering certain parameters of war from 1495 to 1815, an era that can be subdivided into six different periods of conflict from the French perspective. The parameters of war deserving of note include the number of years that knew war, the extent to which France had to fight its interstate wars on its own territory, and the degree of internal or civil conflict that afflicted the state.

Table 1.1 presents the six periods of warfare, 1495–1815, and the percentages of war years and the percentage of internal or civil war years in each.

The most cursory examination suggests that measured by the number of calendar years in which interstate war occurred, the period 1661–1715 had more in common with the eras that preceded it than it did with the remaining years of the *ancien régime*, but more needs to be said.

During the Italian Wars, 1495–1559, the Valois kings undertook wars against foreign enemies during three quarters of the years involved, and while the years after 1542 witnessed several incursions into French territory, the lion's share of the wars were fought outside France in Italy. In addition, the Valois were bothered by little internal rebellion. The era 1560–1610 encompassed the French Wars of Religion; while interstate conflicts were significant, internal and civil war dominated, as over half the calendar years involved such conflicts, and virtually all French warfare was visited upon French territory itself, with the attendant political, economic, and human costs. The major fighting in the first half of the *grand siècle* shared some important similarities with the Wars of Religion. First, internal conflict still played a very great role, since 42 percent of the years witnessed some form of internal war. Second, even during the great interstate conflict with the Empire and Spain, a great many of the campaigns took place on French soil. This internal mayhem climaxed in the years of the Fronde, which combined interstate and civil war in a deadly mixture.