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Edited by Roger Chickering and Stig Forster

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INTRODUCTION

*A Tale of Two Tales**Grand Narratives of War in the Age of Revolution*

ROGER CHICKERING

Historians of warfare in the modern era do not talk a lot to their colleagues who study the early modern period. This problem betrays a more general lack of communication among scholars who regard one another across the late-eighteenth-century divide. It is also due to the curricular segregation that survives at colleges and universities in Europe and North America. In the field of military history, however, the problem is particularly complicated. It has been exacerbated by the two different master narratives that have, for the past half century, organized the history of Western warfare in the early modern and modern eras. Despite remarkable congruities, each narrative has shaped its epoch into a coherent unit more effectively than it has addressed the connections between the two. The issues of narrative articulation are not peripheral. They have to do in the broadest sense with the military significance of the revolutionary transition in the Atlantic world at the end of the eighteenth century. At issue is not only the conduct of operations on the battlefield but also the changing role of warfare in the history of society, politics, and culture.

The master narrative that currently presides over the history of warfare in early modern Europe is that of the “military revolution.” Michael Roberts christened this concept in his inaugural lecture at Queen’s University in Belfast in January 1955.¹ In an intellectual exercise that was as elegant as it was breathtaking, Roberts related all the major dimensions of military and political development in the early modern era to a single technological innovation. The introduction of firearms into European armies during the middle decades of the sixteenth century was, he argued, a revolutionary act. It quickly resulted in far-reaching tactical changes in European land forces,

¹ Michael Roberts, “The Military Revolution, 1560–1660,” in *Essays in Swedish History* (Minneapolis, 1967), 195–225.

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once Maurice of Nassau introduced volley fire at the end of the same century and the armies of Gustavus Adolphus demonstrated several decades later how effectively this tactic could be exploited in offensive operations. Tactical innovation thereafter molded strategy, encouraging battles among ever-larger armies of highly trained musketeers. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the imperatives of raising, drilling, feeding, and supplying great bodies of soldiers had recommended the creation of standing armies. This organizational innovation was the principal marker of early modern absolutism, the centralization and expansion of royal bureaucracies, which in turn became the channels through which the militarization of society fed in the eighteenth century. Tactical innovations were thus, Roberts wrote, “the efficient cause of changes which were really revolutionary. Between 1560 and 1660 a great and permanent transformation came over the European world.”²

One sign of Roberts’s influence has been the vibrant debate that his lecture provoked.³ It has not been difficult to challenge either the timing or the causal links among some of the developments that he had sought to unite in a single analytical edifice. The most important of his critics has been Geoffrey Parker. Parker has argued that one of the central features of the military revolution, the expansion of European armies, owed less to infantry firearms than to artillery; and he has insisted that the development of artillery was primarily a response to new designs in fortification that were introduced during the sixteenth century.⁴ The hallmark of these innovations, the so-called *trace italienne*, enhanced dramatically the defensibility of fortresses and thus multiplied the challenges that faced besieging armies. Although the introduction of this independent variable seemed like a blemish on Roberts’s grand design, Parker captured a consensus of opinion at the end of the debate when he endorsed, in its basic contours, the idea of a military revolution in the early modern era. All the criticism of Roberts had, he conceded, failed “to dent the basic thesis: the scale of warfare in early modern Europe was revolutionized, and this had important and wide-ranging consequences.”⁵ As if to document the vitality of Roberts’s revolutionary model, military

2 Ibid., 217.

3 See Michael Duffy, ed., *The Military Revolution and the State, 1500–1800* (Exeter, U.K., 1980); Clifford J. Rogers, ed., *The Military Revolution Debate: Readings on the Military Transformation of Early Modern Europe* (Boulder, Colorado, 1995); Jeremy Black, ed., *War in the Early Modern World* (Boulder, Colorado, 1999).

4 Geoffrey Parker, “The ‘Military Revolution,’ 1560–1660 – A Myth?” *Journal of Modern History* 48 (1976): 195–214; see also Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, U.K., 1988).

5 Parker, “Military Revolution,” 214.

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analysts have more recently claimed it as a guide to thinking about what they are calling “revolutions in military affairs,” or RMAs.⁶

The master narrative of military history in the early modern epoch begins in any case with tactical change induced by technology. By contrast, the narrative of war in the modern era commences amid political upheaval.⁷ The wars that began in Europe in 1792 represent, as David Bell argues, “The First Total War” – an altogether new sort of warfare, “the cataclysmic intensification of the fighting,” in which understandings of war lurched toward an apocalyptic and redemptive vision of a “final, cleansing paroxysm of violence.”⁸ The emphasis in Bell’s gripping account falls on the culture of war, but it comports with arguments long advanced by military historians about the conduct of operations. Russell Weigley summarized these arguments in the early 1990s, when he wrote that the *levée en masse* “was the first forging of the thunderbolt of a new kind of war – the total war of nations pitting against each other all their resources and passion.”⁹ From this perspective, the French Revolution laid the moral and ideological foundations of total war, as it blurred the distinctions between combatants and noncombatants. The nation’s defense claimed the participation of everyone, whether as soldiers in the field or as providers of material and moral support at home. This principle henceforth established the basic patterns of military history for the next two centuries, as warfare intensified and expanded radically in scope. The unleashing of nationalism translated into the unprecedented intensity of battlefield operations, which were driven by passions that made soldiers both more mobile and implacable in their pursuit of victory. Popular hatreds were mobilized, so the same passions encouraged the radicalization of war aims and the discrediting of moderation, diplomatic compromise, and the restraints that had once been set on war by custom, law, and humanity. At the same time, the ideologization of warfare drove the exponential expansion of European armies, just as it extended dramatically the geographical scope of their operations.

In this reading, the technological revolution of the nineteenth century was the complement of the ideological revolution of the late eighteenth century. Industrialization made total war materially possible. It provided

6 MacGregor Knox and Williamson Murray, eds., *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300–2050* (Cambridge, U.K., 2001).

7 Roger Chickering, “Total War: Use and Abuse of a Concept,” in *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871–1914*, ed. Manfred Boemeke, Roger Chickering, and Stig Förster (Cambridge, U.K., 1999), 13–28.

8 David A. Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon’s Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It* (Boston, 2007), 9, 316.

9 Russell F. Weigley, *The Age of Battles: The Quest for Decisive Warfare from Breitenfeld to Waterloo* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1991), 290.

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the means to equip, transport, and coordinate vast armies, which came to number in the millions of men, as well as to inflict military violence systematically on the producers of war's material instruments: the civilians who had, thanks to the modern logic of combat, become no less critical than soldiers to the prosecution of war. These developments reached a frightful climax in the two great industrial conflicts of the twentieth century, the "century of total war."¹⁰ Hiroshima and Auschwitz became its icons – the one a symbol of the technological virtuosity that threatened total military destruction, and the other a symbol of popular hatreds that had totalized the definition of *enemy*.

Both of these grand narratives, the one based on military revolution, the other on total war, have been more effective in identifying beginnings than endings. The concept of total war was born in the twentieth century, amid two world wars and in anticipation of a third, which was supposed to be an apocalyptic conflict that would bring the grand narrative to the kind of culmination envisaged by Dr. Strangelove. It has yet to happen. In the meantime, the idea of total war has provided little guidance to the hot wars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries; and sixty years after the fact, historians are drawing the hopeful conclusion that the era of total war ended in 1945.

The end of the early modern military revolution carries less immediate practical implications, but it is arguably of greater historiographical significance, insofar as it bears immediately on the narrative beginning of total war. Michael Roberts himself complicated this issue by denying it, arguing instead that total war was the direct issue or a phase of the military revolution: "By 1660 the modern art of war had come to birth. Mass armies, strict discipline, the control of the state, the submergence of the individual, had already arrived." "The road lay open, broad and straight," he concluded, "to the abyss of the twentieth century."¹¹ Parker was more circumspect, not to say coy. He dated the "culmination" of the military revolution in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. Thereafter, he argued, the quickening pace of innovation, the appearance of light-infantry and light-cavalry units, the introduction of divisional organization, and the development of standardized mobile artillery all marked a qualitative leap. The events of the century's last decade then represented "a further revolution in military manpower." But the cumulative impact of changes since the mid-eighteenth century was unambiguous. "The scale of warfare," Parker wrote, was, by

10 Raymond Aron, *The Century of Total War* (Boston, 1955).

11 Roberts, "Military Revolution," 217–18.

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1800, “so totally transformed that it might be said that another ‘military revolution’ had occurred.”¹²

Parker’s cautious use of the word *totally* in this connection indicated that he was alive to the narrative problems that lurked in his own argument, but his suggestion that the modern era in military history began forty years before the French Revolution, within the womb of the ancien régime, did not resolve the issues that have dogged the effort to relate the two military revolutions to each other. A central problem has been the divergent perspectives that the two narratives have encouraged on war and society in the eighteenth century. In the narrative of military revolution, the eighteenth century witnessed the climax of the story, the culmination of centuries of military expansion, the growing pervasiveness of warfare – as well as military organization and values – in European politics and society. It was an age of nearly uninterrupted warfare, experiments in conscription, crippling financial burdens on society, and the supremacy of military culture.¹³

This characterization of the eighteenth century perturbs the narrative of total war. In this narrative, the eighteenth century represents instead the well-ordered terminus a quo of total war. It stands as the classical age in which warfare was both limited in scope and, as Bell’s account has shown, frequent enough to count as a routine undertaking in the eyes of men who thought about the place of war in society and politics.¹⁴ Wars were fought in the Age of Reason for the sake of calculated dynastic ambition by small, professional armies according to generally accepted rules of engagement and conventions that reflected the mores of the aristocratic officer class. Most of the armed forces were recruited by force or guile from the nonproductive sectors of society. They were held together by little more than draconian discipline, which restricted the mobility of soldiers to the range in which their officers could immediately supervise and supply them. As a consequence, civilians were largely spared the military depredations that had plagued the seventeenth century.

This picture of warfare in the eighteenth century defies the ideas of Michael Roberts, which accentuate the military continuities across the era of the French Revolution. In the narrative of total war, by contrast, the French Revolution involved much more than an expansion in the scale of warfare; it was foremost a revolution in attitudes. It was, as one historian

12 Parker, “Military Revolution,” 153.

13 See Quincy Wright, *A Study of War* (Chicago, 1964), 647–9; André Corvisier, *Armies and Societies in Europe, 1494–1789* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1979); Otto Büsch, *Military System and Social Life in Old Regime Prussia, 1713–1807* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, 1996).

14 Bell, *First Total War*, 21–51.

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has observed, “a *political-ideological* revolution that remade warfare from top to bottom.”¹⁵ “By enlisting mass emotions,” to quote Russell Weigley again, the nation-in-arms ruptured the “restraints upon the violence of war by stoking the fires of hatred among peoples.”¹⁶ Soldiers inspired by patriotic élan were the key to this more intensive kind of warfare. The fact that they were highly motivated had far-reaching tactical and strategic consequences. On the battlefield, these patriotic warriors constituted a “terrible mass.” Untethered from rote drill, they fought effectively as skirmishers, maneuvered in flexible formations, attacked in column with cold steel, and pursued their defeated enemies in a way that armies schooled in the old regime could not. Because they could be trusted not to desert, these new soldiers represented a much more formidable strategic force; they could maneuver more rapidly from battlefield to battlefield. They could live off the land, liberated from constant oversight and the ponderous supply trains that shackled their antagonists. The logistics of the new war thus had consequences much like those of the *levée en masse*; wherever French troops marched, whether in France or abroad, civilians were drawn – willing or not – directly into the prosecution of war as suppliers of field armies.

This analysis of the French Revolution’s military repercussions is not disinterested. It owes a great deal to the language of the revolutionaries themselves, as well as to the commentaries of Gerhard von Scharnhorst, Carl von Clausewitz, and other observers outside France, who subsequently sought to make sense of their own military misfortunes at the hands of the French.¹⁷ This analysis has also become increasingly problematic, thanks in part to work that Roberts inspired on war and society in the early modern era and in part to careful scholarship on the armies of the Revolutionary era themselves. It thus seems pertinent again to pose the question of just how the revolutionary upheavals of the late eighteenth century revolutionized warfare. How were revolutionary armies different from both their forebears and their antagonists? And in what ways was the impact of war on civilian society transformed?

These questions can also be reformulated in light of the provocation that Michael Roberts issued a half century ago. One can argue that the two

15 MacGregor Knox, “Mass Politics and Nationalism as Military Revolution: The French Revolution and After,” in Knox and Murray, *Dynamics*, 58 (italics in original).

16 Weigley, *Age of Battles*, 279.

17 See Jean-Paul Bertaud, *The Army of the French Revolution: From Citizen-Soldiers to Instrument of Power* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1988), 102–3, 154–5; see also Wolfgang Kruse, *Die Erfindung des modernen Militarismus: Krieg, Militär und bürgerliche Gesellschaft im politischen Diskurs der Französischen Revolution 1789–1799* (Munich, 2003); Azar Gat, *The Origins of Military Thought from the Enlightenment to Clausewitz* (Oxford, 1989), 99–214; Peter Paret, *Yorck and the Era of Prussian Reform, 1807–1815* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1966).

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grand narratives of military history do not in fact collide in the Revolutionary era. In this alternate reading, the transition in European warfare from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century was marked less by rupture than by continuity, the playing out of dynamics that were already evident in the ancien régime, the testing of ideas long articulated and institutions long anticipated. In this light, the principal innovations that the armies of the Revolutionary era were supposed to embody turn out to be ambivalent, if not illusory. The changes that accompanied war in the age of revolution can thus be understood better as part of a single narrative.

To be sure, one basic innovation of the Revolutionary era seems to remain beyond dispute. The French armies that were raised during the Revolutionary era do appear to have been more representative of the general populace than their predecessors of the earlier eighteenth century had been. The proposition that the armies of Revolutionary France represented a broadly based citizen army can appeal to a distinguished tradition of scholarship.¹⁸ The more recent analysis of Samuel Scott, which confirms this conclusion, suggests that the construction of a French national army in the 1790s was marked by the departure of foreign units and by greater rates of recruitment from the south and west of France – areas that were more remote from the country's vulnerable frontiers. Principally, though, the emerging revolutionary army saw a marked decline in the proportion of urban artisans and a corresponding increase in the poor rural classes, peasants and day laborers, among the recruits of the early 1790s.¹⁹ The significance of this modulation is not, however, self-evident; nor does it suggest radically new reasons for enlistment. Scott himself notes that both rural and urban recruits tended to be poor, and that many of them were persuaded to enlist by economic necessity. In other words, they followed a familiar inducement, which had for centuries driven recruitment in the French royal army and in professional armies elsewhere in Europe, at least to the west of Russia.²⁰

In the narrative of total war, the case for a revolutionary transformation at the end of the eighteenth century turns primarily on the question of motivation. The fact that tens of thousands of young men volunteered for military service in the early years of the French Revolution is extraordinary. But it is another question how, if at all, the ideological enthusiasm that

18 Albert Souboul, *Les soldats de l'an II* (Paris, 1959); André Corvisier, *L'armée française de la fin du XVII^e siècle au ministère du Choiseul* (Paris, 1964).

19 Samuel F. Scott, *The Response of the Royal Army to the French Revolution: The Role and Development of the Line Army, 1787–1793* (Oxford, 1978), 186–90.

20 Corvisier, *Armies*, 131–6; see also M. S. Anderson, *War and Society in Europe and the Old Regime, 1618–1789* (Montreal, 1988), 120–4.

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moved them to join the colors thereafter animated a new kind of soldier. Recent scholarship has illuminated the complexities of combat motivation; it has also thrown doubts on the influence of ideology on behavior under fire.²¹ It has thus drawn into question one of the principal claims about differences between the revolutionary armies and their opponents. Desertion, the classic marker of ill-motivated troops, was no less common among the volunteer armies of the Revolution than among the professional armies of the eighteenth century.²² Rates of desertion in the French armies fell only with the amalgamations in 1793–4, whose purpose and effect were to bring more discipline to units of volunteers – in other words, to make them fight more like the professionals against whom they took the field.

Both before and after the amalgamations, motivation appears to have pivoted on the small combat group – on the discipline, authority, respect, sense of honor, and collective pride that prevailed in units of soldiers from the regimental level down. Group dynamics in these units have always been complicated. Ideology and discipline were but two of the components in an implicit contract that regulated relations among troops and officers – even in the armies of the eighteenth century. “Soldiers may have enlisted under what amounted to absolute terms of service,” remarks Dennis Showalter in his study of Frederick the Great’s army. “In practice they had very solid ideas of their implied rights.”²³ Scott notes of the French royal army that regimental loyalties “increased cohesion among the soldiers and between them and their immediate superiors, the NCO’s.”²⁴ The political education that revolutionary governments promoted among French troops in the early 1790s bore massively on questions of small-group cohesion, but the impact was equivocal.²⁵ Rewriting the contract in the new language of natural rights (to say nothing of voting) could undermine as well as strengthen discipline in the ranks.²⁶ In his study of the revolutionary *Armée du Nord*, John Lynn has admittedly reached different conclusions. He identifies the squad or *ordinaire* as the most important primary group, and he argues that the revolutionary ideal of fraternity enhanced discipline and cohesion, “tightening bonds and defining the relationship between men as familial,

21 Anthony Kellett, *Combat Motivation: The Behavior of Soldiers in Battle* (Boston, 1982), 327.

22 Bertaud, *Army*, 260.

23 Dennis Showalter, *The Wars of Frederick the Great* (London, 1996), 6. See also Christopher Duffy, *The Military Experience in the Age of Reason* (New York, 1988), 129–36; Sascha Möbius, “Die Kommunikation zwischen preußischen Soldaten und Offizieren im Siebenjährigen Krieg zwischen Gewalt und Konsens,” *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift* 63 (2004): 325–53.

24 Scott, *Response*, 35.

25 Alan Forrest, *The Soldiers of the French Revolution* (Durham, North Carolina, 1990), 89–124.

26 Bertaud, *Army*, 261–2.

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based on affection, support, and a strong degree of selflessness.”²⁷ This conclusion would rest more secure, however, in the company of empirical comparison with other armies of Revolutionary France, as well as with their predecessors.²⁸

The question of soldiers’ motivation has also been linked to the introduction of new, more flexible tactical formations in the revolutionary armies, whose infantry could, unlike their predecessors, fight in line, column, or as *tirailleurs*. As evidence of high motivation in the Armée du Nord, Lynn appeals to “the tactical reliance upon the élan of troops massed in spirited bayonet assaults and the initiative of individuals dispersed as skirmishers.”²⁹ The origins and significance of this “flexible tactical system of surprising variety” have been at issue for more than a century, since Jean Colin first drew attention to its roots in the old regime.³⁰ The scholarship of Robert Quimby has left no doubt, however, that the flexible *ordre mixte* was a child of the eighteenth century, that it incubated in the minds of Jacques-Antoine Hippolyte de Guibert and his forebears decades before the French Revolution, and that it lay at the foundation of field regulations that were introduced into the royal French army in 1791 – at a time when the army was still, in most basic respects, an institution of the ancien régime.³¹

Finally, a revolution in the motivation of soldiers also figures in the transformation of logistics that is said to have brought a massive increase in the burdens imposed by revolutionary armies on civilians. Because the new soldiers of the Revolution believed in their cause, they could be trusted to live off the land in small groups. They no longer required the elaborate system of magazines and supply trains that large field armies had required, lest the bulk of the soldiery desert. However, innovations brought by the Revolution to logistics have also been the subject of controversy, thanks largely to the work of Martin van Creveld who has blamed Clausewitz for distorting basic continuities that survived the Revolution. Armies lived off the land before the French Revolution as well as after it. “Eighteenth century armies,” van Creveld insists, “lived as their predecessors had always done, and as their successors were destined to do until – and including – the first weeks of World War I; that is, by taking the bulk of their needs

27 John A. Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791–94* (Urbana, Illinois, 1984), 173.

28 See Bertaud, *Army*, 240.

29 Lynn, *Bayonets*, 178.

30 Jean Colin, *L'éducation militaire de Napoléon* (Paris, 1901); see also A. M. J. Hyatt, “The Origins of Napoleonic Warfare: A Survey of Interpretations,” *Military Affairs* 30 (1966–67): 177–85.

31 Robert S. Quimby, *The Background of Napoleonic Warfare: The Theory of Military Tactics in Eighteenth-Century France* (New York, 1968).

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away from the country.”³² The depredations that the armies of the French Revolution visited on areas through which they marched thus continued an age-old tradition of the *chevauchée* against vulnerable civilians.³³

These judgments are difficult to square with the proposition that modern warfare began precipitously at the end of the eighteenth century. So are other continuities that historians have traced between the armies of the French Revolution and their predecessors. Still, it would be idle to argue that no fundamental change took place in European warfare in the 1790s. At issue are the nature, dimensions, and causes of the transformation. The narrative of total war has emphasized the dramatic escalation in the intensity of war, which accompanied the ideological transformation of the soldiery and the civilians who supported them. Nationalism, in this logic, “injected into war a ferocity that far outstripped the religious fanaticism of the preceding century.”³⁴ This proposition is doubtful at best and impossible to demonstrate in any case. The whole argument for the intensification of war by revolution rests on shaky assumptions about both the practical impact of ideology on the battlefield and the institutional dynamics in the armies of the old regime (to say nothing of cloudy understandings of *intensity*).

An alternative reading of the late eighteenth century is plausible, but it requires rethinking both the governing narratives. It is based on the proposition that the most revolutionary feature of the new French armies was their size.³⁵ The most important changes in warfare were hence due to the sheer force of numbers. Bigger armies continued, however, to win.³⁶ The achievement of the revolutionary governments was to create the institutions to recruit and support vast armies, although here again, particularly in the case of conscription, the French could draw amply on precedents from the eighteenth century. The military relevance of ideology lay principally in its contribution to these numbers. Whatever its impact on the motivation of soldiers in the field, patriotism encouraged them to enlist in the first place; hence it made possible the building of armies that dwarfed their opponents on the battlefield. Desertion remained a fact of life in these new armies, but great pools of manpower made it a less critical problem than it had been in smaller, professional armies. At the same time, numerical superiority recommended the employment of shock tactics in the knowledge that losses

32 Martin van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (Cambridge, U.K., 1977), 33.

33 Mark Grimsley and Clifford J. Rogers, eds., *Civilians in the Path of War* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 2002).

34 Williamson Murray and MacGregor Knox, “Thinking about Revolutions in Warfare,” in Murray and Knox, *Dynamics*, 8.

35 T. C. W. Blanning, *The French Revolutionary Wars, 1787–1802* (London, 1996), 116–28.

36 See Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Napoleon* (London, 1977), 247–55.