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Frederick Lewis Taylor

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

THE change from mediaeval to modern methods in the art of war is closely related to the general transformation of European civilization which goes by the name of the Renaissance. The revival of interest in ancient history and literature had a distinct effect on military theory and practice. The new spirit of inquiry and experiment applied itself vigorously to military problems. Moreover the avowed national separatism which replaced the sham imperialism of the Middle Ages accentuated the rivalry between states and produced wars which were more frequent, more prolonged, more general, and more intense than those of the preceding centuries. The history of these wars, waged in an age of eager intellectual activity, reveals, as we should expect it to reveal, rapid progress, amounting almost to revolution, in the use of arms, but what makes an examination of the subject singularly instructive is the fact that the most important of these campaigns were fought in Italy during the culminating years of the Italian Renaissance. The finest minds of the day had the opportunity of witnessing, of recording, and of commenting on the exploits of the leading captains and the most famous troops of Europe. They assisted in the interplay of ideas and the comparison of experiences. The fruit of this period of

T. A. W.

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intensive cultivation of the art of war was the military science of the modern world.

When, in the autumn of 1494, Charles VIII of France set out for the conquest of Naples he did so in a spirit of adventure, at the head of an army raised for the occasion, and with the declared desire to proceed ultimately to the Holy Land¹. When, in 1529, the treaty of Cambrai brought the Italian wars to a close there had already appeared in Europe such modern phenomena as the principle of the balance of power, trained standing armies, and competitive armaments. In the following chapters an attempt will be made to trace the stages of the process by which this change from mediaeval to modern Europe manifested itself in the development of the art of war. The inquiry will be restricted to the campaigns which were fought in Italy between the years mentioned above, but since during that period Italy was the battlefield of Europe it will be well to begin with a brief consideration of the military condition of the countries which took part in the wars.

During the first half of the fifteenth century France, under the stress of foreign invasion, had evolved the earliest European standing army². The feudal levy had proved unequal to the strain of a prolonged war of liberation and had been replaced

¹ Cf. *Lettres de Charles VIII* (ed. Pélicier), nos. DCCXLV and DCCLVIII, and his proclamation on entering Papal territory (in La Pilorgerie, *Campagnes et bulletins de Charles VIII*, p. 101).

² Jähns, *Handbuch einer Geschichte des Kriegswesens* (hereafter referred to as *Handbuch*), p. 841.

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by permanent organizations of cavalry and infantry commanded by professional soldiers. Cavalry was still reckoned the more important arm and no clear distinction was yet made between heavy and light cavalry. The smallest cavalry unit was a group of six, called a "lance," which consisted of one heavy-armed warrior, or "man-at-arms," and five more lightly armed horsemen—a survival from the days when the feudal knight was accompanied into battle by his armed followers. A true national infantry was raised towards the middle of the century by the enrolment of a force of *franc archers*. Under Louis XI these were raised to the strength of 16,000¹. Later, however, they were disbanded by the same monarch, who preferred to rely on the services of Swiss mercenaries. The French infantry which fought in the Italian wars was not national but regional. It consisted chiefly of Gascons and Picards and was allotted only a secondary rôle in battle². The main part was played by professional soldiers hired from Switzerland and Germany.

At the close of the fifteenth century the Swiss were reputed the best infantry in Europe, and their successful war against Charles of Burgundy had

¹ La Barre Duparcq, *L'art de la guerre*, vol. II, ch. I, § 3.

² Its value was definitely lowered by the incorporation of Swiss and German mercenaries in the French army. Machiavelli, writing from France in the closing years of Louis XII's reign, remarked that the French infantry was low-born and in a position of inferiority to the nobles, and that the Gascons, who were the best of them, were nevertheless cowards in battle (see his *Ritratti delle cose della Francia*, in *Opere*, vol. VI, p. 297).

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raised incalculably the prestige of the footsoldier. The contempt in which infantry had been held in the Middle Ages had not been appreciably diminished by the successes of the English bowmen against the mailed chivalry of France, for the secret of these victories had been the keeping of the enemy at a distance: the archer who allowed a mailed knight to reach him was a doomed man. In the Swiss Christendom saw for the first time an army of foot which sought out and defeated in hand-to-hand fight the best cavalry of the day. The weapons and tactics of the Swiss will be considered in detail later: it will suffice to say here that their value was quickly recognized by European sovereigns, and that their high reputation led to the raising of German regiments trained and organized on exactly similar lines¹. These landsknechts (as they were called), though subjects of the emperor and often enrolled expressly for imperial wars, could nevertheless be hired, with the emperor's sanction, by foreign governments in need of troops. Both Swiss and landsknechts were recruited—in theory at any rate—entirely from free peasants and burghers², and both maintained close human relations with their leaders—often indeed influencing military policy by an organized expression of opinion. In these respects they were in marked contrast to the royal troops of neighbouring states. Switzerland did not produce mounted soldiers. On the other hand in Germany as in France heavy cavalry

¹ Ricotti, *Storia delle compagnie di ventura*, pt. v, ch. 1, § 8.

² Rüstow, *Geschichte der Infanterie*, vol. 1, bk. III, p. 203.

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remained the most important and the most dreaded arm¹.

Political unity and prolonged war against the infidel had recently produced significant developments in the military organization of Spain. Here for the first time we see the infantry definitely given precedence over other arms². Spain had the good fortune to breed a great soldier, and the Spanish monarchs had the good sense to let him forge the weapon with which he won his victories. Gonsalvo de Cordova, known to his contemporaries as the Great Captain, increased the numbers, reorganized the formations, and revised the equipment of the Spanish infantry, and the result was a blend between the Roman legion and the Swiss battalion of his own day. The Spanish cavalry were reduced in numbers, the light horse were separated from the men-at-arms³, and both were made auxiliary to the infantry. It was such an army which Gonsalvo later led into Italy.

Among the Italian states in the fifteenth century the art of war made little material progress. The man-at-arms still enjoyed all his mediaeval repute. Footsoldiers were universally despised, no attempt was made to organize them for the shock of battle, and in the tiny armies of the period they were usually outnumbered by the cavalry⁴. The reason for this was partly political and partly economic. Many of

¹ Jähns, *Handbuch*, p. 1067.

² *Ibid.* pp. 1044 seq.

³ *Ibid.* pp. 1067 seq.

⁴ Ricotti, *Storia delle compagnie di ventura*, pt. v, ch. 1, § 1; Rüstow, *Geschichte der Infanterie*, vol. 1, bk. III, p. 206; Jähns, *Handbuch*, pp. 818 seq.

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the small states of Italy were governed by tyrants who were frequently professional soldiers and whose power depended upon the maintenance of a standing army. Since the resources of these states were not equal to supporting a large permanent body of horse and foot, and since the tyrants were disinclined for obvious reasons to arm their own subjects, they contented themselves with a few hundred mounted mercenaries, who were both more imposing and more efficient than the Italian infantry. In the event of a war between two of the larger states of Italy both sides would hasten to hire the services of these local military rulers¹ and of other unattached captains of mercenaries (*condottieri*), and the commercial outlook of such combatants would manifest itself in a long campaign consisting chiefly of manoeuvre and involving a minimum of bloodshed². Winter operations, work which involved strain, the infliction of heavy casualties, were avoided by the *condottieri*³ as tending to reduce the common stock of trained soldiers—the currency on which was based their political and economic stability. In strange contrast to this *ca' canny* practice of the art of war is the

¹ Cf. Machiavelli, *Legazione I*, which deals with the hire of 200 men-at-arms from Jacopo IV d' Appiano, lord of Piombino, by Florence for the Pisan war.

² Jähns, *Handbuch*, p. 818. Cf. Machiavelli, *Prince*, ch. XII and *Discorsi*, bk. II, ch. XVIII; Guicciardini, *Istoria d' Italia*, bk. XV, p. 73 (Milanese edition, 1803; all subsequent references are to this edition).

³ Machiavelli, *Prince*, ch. XII. Cf. also Sanuto's phrase concerning the battle of Fornovo, the first battle of the Italian wars: "non si faceva presoni, come in le guerre de Italia" (*La spedizione di Carlo VIII*, bk. IV).

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kindred phenomenon of the rise of military theory. To the Italian condottieri who fought so sparingly belongs the honour of originating the modern theoretical study of warfare. The intense intellectual life of the Italian Renaissance, combined with the aggregation of a number of competing states within a small area, provided both the atmosphere and the soil for fostering this new branch of human knowledge. The condottieri founded military schools¹ at which they analysed strategical and tactical problems, emphasized the interdependence of the different operations of a campaign, and fortified their arguments with citations from the Greek and Latin classics. It will be readily understood how the new enthusiasm for abstract discussion accentuated the military dilettantism which prevailed in Italy towards the end of the fifteenth century, but this degeneration should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the condottieri were the medium through which the Renaissance, both as a classical and as a scientific movement, influenced the development of the art of war in Europe.

The invention of gunpowder at an uncertain date well back in the Middle Ages had not revolutionized military method. Heavy guns for battering down the walls of fortresses were now in general use, but it had yet to be shown that the mediaeval stronghold was obsolete as a means of defence. Although the casting

¹ Ricotti, *Storia delle compagnie di ventura*, vol. III, pt. IV. Such a school is mentioned by Porto, *Lettere Storiche* (ed. Bressan), no. 43, "della quale sono usciti molti dotti capitani."

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of lighter guns and the adoption of improved means of transport by the French opened possibilities for an extended use of artillery in battle¹, no clear distinction yet existed between field artillery and siege artillery². The invention of small portable firearms had introduced nothing new into the tactics of the time³: they were considered less effective than the cross-bow or arbalest⁴, their use was confined chiefly to the less serviceable infantry, and no government attempted either to manufacture them in large quantities or to make their employment the subject of special training. Machiavelli, writing as late as 1520, could still belittle the importance of gunpowder in modern war⁵.

To sum up: in 1494 Europe as a whole still regarded the elaborately equipped mounted warrior, the descendant of the mailed knight of the Middle Ages, as the most important instrument of battle. It is true that the Swiss infantry had recently won some astonishing victories over heavy cavalry, and that in Spain the operations of the mounted troops were subordinated to those of the footsoldier; but the Swiss and the Spaniards were not typical of European infantry. Indeed there did not exist a European *type* of infantry. The Swiss and the Spaniards were but two among many local types. On the other hand the

¹ La Barre Duparcq, *L'art de la guerre*, vol. II, ch. I, § 5.

² Jähns, *Handbuch*, pp. 786 seq.

³ La Barre Duparcq, vol. II, p. 48.

⁴ Rüstow, *Geschichte der Infanterie*, vol. I, bk. III, pp. 222-3, 260.

⁵ *Arte della guerra*, bk. III.

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strongly marked resemblances between the men-at-arms of different countries gave to the heavy cavalry the character and the prestige of an international institution¹. Gunpowder had been in use for two centuries, and cannon and small arms were familiar objects in all armies, yet there was little sign of the revolutionary changes in siegecraft, fortification, and tactics which we associate with that discovery. Finally in Italy the influence of the Renaissance and the presence of numerous professional soldiers had combined to give birth to the theoretic study of the art of war. Italians were then the teachers of mankind, and warfare was one of the many subjects which they expounded to the advantage of the world. Italy resembled a vast military academy. The comparatively bloodless little campaigns of the condottieri may be regarded as practical demonstrations by professors of the art of war—a kind of giant Kriegsspiel—and the national armies which invaded Italy as pupils who came to improve their knowledge of soldiering. Many of the academic theories broke down in practice—as academic theories have a habit of breaking down—and much of what the pupils learned they learned from their own experiences and from each other. Nevertheless the rapidity of the progress made and the sureness of the conclusions reached were undoubtedly due to the prevailing Italian atmosphere of research, experiment, and speculation.

¹ Jähns, *Handbuch*, p. 1052; Rüstow, *Geschichte der Infanterie*, vol. II, bk. III, p. 197.

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CHAPTER II

STRATEGY

STRATEGY may be defined as a manoeuvring before battle in order that your enemy may be found at a disadvantage when battle is joined. It is thus a means to an end. The ultimate object of every commander is to defeat his enemy in the field, but his ability to attain that object depends at least as much on the movements which precede battle as on tactical efficiency when battle is joined. Indeed in modern war the scene and the hour of the deciding action have often to be created by prolonged and painful effort, and it is sometimes the duty of a commander deliberately to postpone a decision until the situation become more favourable to his own chances of success. According to a master of contemporary warfare, it is this preliminary strategic manoeuvring which calls forth the highest qualities of generalship. For commanders directing the strategy of a campaign he considers “an omnipresent sense of a great strategic objective and a power of patiently biding their time,” and further, “that highest of military gifts—the power of renunciation, of ‘cutting losses,’ of sacrificing the less essential for the more¹.” This strategic sense, this capacity to envisage manoeuvre and battle as equally vital parts of a comprehensive plan of campaign, was naturally less developed when war was

¹ Viscount French, 1914, ch. x.