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a cura di
VIRGLIO ILARI



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Ultima Ratio Regum (Estrema ragione dei Re) iscrizione su un cannone all'ingresso del Museo di Storia Militare di Budapest. Foto O. Mustafiri, CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication (Wikipedia commons).

Il celebre motto fu apposto sulle canne delle artiglierie francesi fuse dal 1650 al 1793, e anche su parte delle coeve artiglierie sabaude. La variante *ultima ratio regis* (estrema ragione del re) fu usata a partire dal 1742 sulle artiglierie prussiane e successivamente anche sui cannoni spagnoli, mentre l'analogo *regis ultima ratio* è tuttora il motto dell'artiglieria belga.

Breitenfeld and Montecuccoli

How to learn from a battle

By MARCO MOSTARDA

ABSTRACT – The essay aims at identifying in the combat experience of Raimondo Montecuccoli on the field of Breitenfeld the lessons subsequently absorbed by his military thought. Montecuccoli's ideas are compared with our understanding of the coeval military practice, laying stress on logistical constraints and the stymieing effect on manoeuvre brought about by fortresses in the age of the *bastion fort*. Special attention is also devoted to the previous interpretative proposals of Montecuccoli's thought and their intellectual foundations.

KEYWORDS – ATTRITION – BREITENFELD – DELBRÜCK – MONTECUCCOLI – TACTICS – THIRTY YEARS WAR

Breitenfeld and the myth of the Tercios

On the 17th September 1631 the Swedish-Saxon combined army led by king Gustavus Adolphus and the Imperial-Leaguist army of Johann Tserclaes, Count of Tilly, clashed at Breitenfeld, a village north to Leipzig: according to a well-established historiographical tradition embraced and strengthened by Hans Delbrück, the Catholic infantry was arrayed in four massive pike squares,¹ not dissimilar – aside from the shot sleeves – to the formations of Swiss and Landsknecht infantry typical of the Italian Wars a century earlier; in 1955 Piero Pieri, setting his analysis of Raimondo Montecuccoli's thought on the backdrop of the authoritative battle narrative provided by Delbrück, described them as «four massive squares of 6.000 men each, one beside the other so to form a single phalanx».² Such a description was not consistent with the military prac-

1 Hans DELBRÜCK, *Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen Geschichte*, Teil 4, Berlin, Georg Stilke, 1920, p. 235: «Auch zwischen den vier tiefen, massiven Infanterie-Terzios, die in einer Linie standen, müssen große Intervalle gewesen sein».

2 Piero PIERI, *Guerra e politica negli scrittori italiani*, Milano, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore,

tice of the time, yet it was reiterated because it fitted in with the idea that the so called Swedish System, in itself an enhancement of the Dutch Reforms brought about by Maurice of Nassau, was poised to usher in a new era of the art of war against the alleged backwardness of the Spanish tactics based on the *Tercios*.³

Further researches have disproven this tactical picture: Thomas Barker, countering as groundless the by now classical image of «four, monstrous Spanish tercios» proposed for the first time by Walter Opitz in his influential work on the battle of Breitenfeld,⁴ suggested that Tilly's infantry must have been arrayed in formations 1.500 strong, «thirty men deep and fifty wide».⁵ I am inclined to believe that an indirect validation to the correctness of this assumption can be provided by Montecuccoli's treatise *Delle battaglie*,⁶ specifically by the section in which the author examines the different formations of the infantry battalions: touching upon the so called «battaglione duplicato» (double battalion), an extended formation with a number of files twice the number of the ranks, the author adds that it was used by the Spaniards.⁷

1975, p. 69: «la fanteria in quattro mastodontici quadrati di seimila uomini, affiancati sì da formare un'unica falange».

- 3 Russell F. WEIGLEY, *The Age of Battles. The Quest for Decisive Warfare from Breitenfeld to Waterloo*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 3-14; as late as 1991 and despite a wealth of new studies Weigley still reiterated such a conviction, introducing the Dutch Reforms of Maurits of Nassau – and the Swedish Army of Gustavus Adolphus stemming from them – under the sobriquet of the «return of the legions».
- 4 Walter OPITZ, *Die Schlacht bei Breitenfeld, am 17. September 1631*, Leipzig, A. Deichert'sche Verlagsbuchh. Nachf. (Georg Böhme), 1892, pp. 92-93.
- 5 Thomas M. BARKER, *The Military Intellectual and the Battle. Raimondo Montecuccoli and the Thirty Years War*, Albany, New York, State University of New York Press, 1975, pp. 175, 177.
- 6 Montecuccoli himself took part to the battle, even though his role in it is not clear aside from his own claims of having assailed the enemy with such an impetus that he ended up surrounded, wounded and captured: BARKER, *The Military Intellectual*, pp. 14, 16; Cesare CAMPORI, *Raimondo Montecuccoli. La famiglia e i suoi tempi*, Firenze, G. Barbera Editore, 1876, pp. 59-60.
- 7 Raimondo MONTECUCCOLI, «Delle battaglie. Primo trattato», in Raimondo LURAGHI (ed.), *Le opere di Raimondo Montecuccoli*, vol. II, Roma, Ufficio Storico SME, 1988, p. 27. Montecuccoli examines many different arrangements for the infantry, starting from two well-known formations taken from the Spanish practice: the «quadro d'uomini» (*cuadro de gente*) e «quadro di terreno» (*cuadro de terreno*), even though he discards them as outmoded because the experience found that «they are weak frontally» («sono debili di fronte»). For the employment of the *cuadro de gente* and *cuadro de terreno* in the Spanish Army, see Julio Albi DE LA CUESTA, *De Pavía a Rocroi. Los Tercios Españoles*, Madrid,



ILLVST.^{MVS} IOANNES, COM. DE TSERCLAES. DOM. TILLI, BARO,
 DE MORBAYS, DOM. DE BALLAST, MONTIG. HOLERS,
 HEESWYCK. DYNTER. ETC.

Pet. de Jode sculp.

Ant. van Dyck pinxit

Cum privilegio

Portrait of Johannes Tserclaes, Count Tilly, by Pieter de Jode (1570-1634) after Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641). Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Achenbach Foundation. Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons.

Indeed, if we apply the rules dictated by Montecuccoli for forming up a double battalion to the 1.500-men strong units Tilly is presumed to have employed, we obtain as a result a rectangular formation twenty-seven men deep and fifty-four wide: figures not far from those provided by Barker. Considering that the Count of Tilly had learnt his trade serving in the Spanish Army of Flanders, before entering in the service of the Austrian branch of the House of Habsburg back at the time of the Long Turkish War,⁸ I think it is plausible to assume that he made use of the Spanish tactics (or a revised version thereof) all along his subsequent career up until Breitenfeld.⁹

After refuting the notion that the Catholic infantry was arrayed in square formations, it is worth noting that the very idea of four huge pike squares most probably stemmed from the fact that the Imperial-Leaguist infantry was gathered together into “four, simple checkerboard groupings on three regiments apiece plus an extra tercio on either side”.¹⁰ Such an interpretation, picked up by William Guthrie¹¹ and more recently by Peter Wilson,¹² rather than contradicting Montecuccoli’s observation – according to which Tilly «deployed the whole army in a single line and found himself in a bad situation as a result»¹³ – corroborates it, as long as we assume that these groupings of three infantry “regiments” manoeuvred conjointly on the battlefield as four autonomous wedges, instead of creating two distinct lines of, respectively, four and eight regiments.

The Dutch Reforms and the Saxon Army

It seems that the Catholic infantry was not the only force arrayed in a wedge formation, that day: the 12.100 strong ten Saxon battalions, which occupied the

Desperta Ferro Ediciones, 2021, pp. 87-88.

8 Peter H. WILSON, *The Thirty Years War. Europe’s Tragedy*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009, pp. 83-84.

9 For the same reason I am inclined to think that the same formation was used at the Battle of White Mountain when, alongside the Leaguist troops of Tilly, the Imperial forces were led by another veteran of the Army of Flanders such as Bucquoy.

10 BARKER, *Military Intellectual*, p. 178.

11 William P. GUTHRIE, *Battles of the Thirty Years War. From White Mountain to Nördlingen, 1618-1635*, Westport, Connecticut – London, Greenwood Press, 2002, p. 25.

12 WILSON, *Thirty Years War*, p. 473.

13 MONTECUCCOLI, “Delle battaglie”, in Luraghi (ed.), *Opere*, II, p. 34: «il Tilly nella battaglia di Leipzig, il quale schierò tutto l’esercito in una sol fronte, e se ne trovò male».

left of the Protestant army, were deployed in a way that has not failed to elicit the curiosity of modern commentators. Barker stresses that both the Saxon infantry and the two cavalry wings «resembled huge pyramids, the tips of which pointed toward the foe»;¹⁴ Guthrie is more detailed, describing the Saxon infantry formation as a «hollow arrowhead, with a battalion at point, two behind each flank, two more behind their flanks, and the five remaining as the base».¹⁵

This choice is admittedly puzzling, even more so if we consider that such a deployment masked the fire of half its forces (the five battalions at the base) at a time in which the Saxon Army had already adopted the Dutch System with its stress on superior firepower.¹⁶ The said Guthrie notes that such a formation «appeared in scholarly works» but was rarely adopted on the battlefield and that, perhaps, Arnim, the Saxon commander, showed to be «out of his depth» by choosing it.¹⁷ This explanation is not entirely satisfactory, at least because Johann Georg Arnim (or Arnheim) was held to be a talented commander.¹⁸

A better rationale for such a choice is again provided by Montecuccoli, who describes the wedge as a formation meant to break through the enemy army, all the more if the latter «is deployed in a single line, so that it is easy to penetrate it by using the wedge, being [the enemy] unable to come to help [the centre] with the wings of his battalia, which are too far away»; the author then adds that «at the battle of Leipzig [Breitenfeld] Arnim deployed the Saxon Army in just about this way, but because the army was newly raised and with little battle experience,

14 BARKER, *Military Intellectual*, p. 177.

15 GUTHRIE, *Battles*, p. 26.

16 David A. PARROTT, “Strategy and Tactics in the Thirty Years’ War: The ‘Military Revolution’” in Clifford J. ROGERS (ed.), *The Military Revolution Debate. Readings on the Military Transformation of Early Modern Europe*, New York – London, Routledge, 2018, p. 230. See also J. A. DE MOOR, “Experience and Experiment: some reflections upon the military developments in 16th and 17th century in Western Europe”, in Marco VAN DER HOEVEN (ed.), *Exercise of Arms. Warfare in the Netherlands, 1568-1648*, Leiden – New York – Köln, Brill, 1997, pp. 26-27: after 1600, that is after the success at Nieuwpoort, Dutch officers started to be employed as instructors «in Brandenburg, the Palatinate, Baden, Württemberg, Hesse, Brunswick, Saxony, and in Sweden».

17 GUTHRIE, *Battles*, p. 26.

18 A brief biographical profile is provided by BARKER, *Military Intellectual*, p. 234. Already an imperial colonel and a trusted deputy of Wallenstein back at the time of the war against Denmark, Arnim will be involved in the murky negotiations leading to the assassination of the *generalissimo* in 1634. See: Golo MANN, *Wallenstein*, Firenze, Sansoni Editore, 1981, pp. 832-838.

it was at once routed by the Imperials», *en passant* confirming the correctness of Guthrie's reconstruction.¹⁹ Therefore, the wedge was a logical choice for breaking through the single line of infantry presented by Tilly, of course provided that the Saxons could attack first; once timely attacked in turn by the Imperial-Leaguist troops, though, I am convinced that such a formation proved to be a hindrance to an effective defensive action and, once the foremost Saxon battalions were thrown in disarray on the supervening ones, the entire formation was easily broken:²⁰ according to the somewhat disparaging remarks of an eyewitness like Robert Monro, «the force of the enemies Battailes falls on the Duke of Saxony, charging with horse first in the middle of the Battailes,²¹ and then the foote giving two *Salves* of Musket amongst them, they were put to the Rout, horse and foote, and the enemy following them cryed *Victoria* as if the day had beene wonne».²²

The Failure of the Catholic Flanking Movement

As for what we know – at least with some degree of accuracy – to have happened afterwards, the Imperial-Leaguist infantry on the right set out to exploit the gap in the enemy front in order to outflank the Swedes and fall upon their

19 MONTECUCCOLI, “Delle battaglie”, in LURAGHI (ed.), *Opere*, II, p. 60: «Alcun capitano ha fatto la fronte dell'esercito ad uso d'un conio, giudicando potesse per tal via aprir l'esercito nemico, [...] e se l'inimico è steso in una sola fronte, egli è facile il penetrarlo col conio, non potendo venir sì presto al soccorso co' i corni della sua battaglia, i quali sono troppo discosti [...] Nella battaglia di Leipzig l'Arnim [dispose] l'Armata di Sassonia quasi in questa foggia, ma perché l'Armata era levata nuovamente e poco usa a combattere, fu subito messa in rotta da quella degl'Imperiali».

20 Another possible explanation, and one still consistent with the elucidations provided by Montecucoli, is that the wedge arranged by Arnim also represented some kind of extremization of the formation prescribed by the Dutch Reforms. In Keith ROBERTS, *Pike and Shot Tactics, 1590-1660*, Oxford, Osprey Publishing, 2010, pp. 18-19 is reproduced one of the most common battlefield deployments practiced by the Dutch and taken from a Danish manuscript of 1625: in the third and final stage of the manoeuvre, the three brigades of six battalions each are arrayed into a diamond pattern, that is on three successive lines of two battalions.

21 The cavalry of the Catholic right flank, made up of five squadrons, was commanded by Friedrich Rudolf von Fürstenberg-Stühlingen; the Croats of Lodovico Isolani closed the formation on the far right. See BARKER, *Military Intellectual*, p. 177; GUTHRIE, *Battles*, p. 25.

22 Robert MONRO, *Monro, His Expedition with the Worthy Scots Regiment (Called Mac-Keyes Regiment) levied in August 1626. The Second Part*, London, Printed by William Jones in Red-Crosse Streete, 1637, pp. 65-66.

rear: an attempt thwarted by Gustav Horn, in command of the Swedish left wing, who took advantage of the time needed by Fürstenberg to regroup his squadrons for drawing forces from the second line, thus forming up an improvised line at right angles to the front line.²³ The attack of the Catholic “Tercios” lost momentum – rather easily, according to Monro’s recounting²⁴ – against the resistance opposed by the Swedes; in turn this tactical fiasco became irredeemable once the defeat of the Leaguist cavalry on the left flank, led by Gottfried Heinrich zu



Portrait of Gottfried Heinrich von Pappenheim.
Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons.

Pappenheim, had the effect of isolating the infantry centre, thus overrun by the cavalry’s counterattack led by Gustavus Adolphus.²⁵ The already heavy casualties inflicted to the Imperial-Leaguist forces during the battle were further compound-

23 BARKER, *The Military Intellectual*, p. 180; GUTHRIE, *Battles*, p. 30.

24 MONRO, *His Expedition*, p. 66: «but our small Ordinance being twice discharged amongst them, and before we stirred, we charged them with a salvo of muskets, which was repaid, and incontinent our Brigad advancing unto them with push of pike, putting one of their battailes in disorder, fell on the execution, so that they were put to the route». The sudden rout of Tilly’s battle-hardened veterans is open to different conjectural explanations.

25 WILSON, *Thirty Years War*, p. 475.

ed by the vigorous pursuit suffered at the hands of the Swedes and because of the revenge exacted by the Saxon peasants all along the brief retreat from Breitenfeld to Leipzig: two-thirds of the forces Tilly had at the beginning of the battle were annihilated.²⁶

The Single Line and the Lesson of the Ancients

The importance of Breitenfeld stands out in shaping Montecuccoli's meditations because, as already recognized by Pieri, the Modenese count managed to extract from the battle some principles bound to inform all his subsequent tactical thought:²⁷ the first evident deduction from such an experience was that «the army must not fight all at once, so that it can be able to make up the losses by renewing the fight two or three times, for such is the opinion of the greatest captains: the example provided by the Romans proved it and the modern usage demonstrates it. Reason dictates it, because it takes the fate to desert you three times, or the enemy to be so accomplished to win three times, if they want to prevail over an army which can be reinforced thrice».²⁸ The army, therefore, had to be deployed in three lines: a precept Tilly had failed to abide by. Montecuccoli's critique of the conduct of the Walloon commander is all the more poignant because it seems that the decision of deploying the army in a single line was not forced upon him by the circumstances. While usually depicting Tilly as a captain whose generalship was curtailed by a conservative tactical approach, historians have been ready to excuse the deployment he chose at Breitenfeld as an understandable attempt at foiling the risk of being outflanked by a numerically superior enemy.²⁹ In this

26 BARKER, *Military Intellectual*, pp. 180-181: the author estimates at 7.600 out of a total of 31.100 men the casualties during the battle. As we will see further on, there are some disagreements about the size of the Imperial-Leaguist Army.

27 PIERI, *Guerra e politica*, p. 88.

28 MONTECUCCOLI, "Delle battaglie", in LURAGHI (ed.), *Opere*, II, p. 22: «che l'armata non combatta mai tutta in una volta; ma che possa rifarsi, et il combattimento reiterarsi due o tre volte, perché tale è la sentenza de' Capitani migliori; perché l'esempio de' Romani l'ha dimostrato, e l'usanza moderna lo comprova; perché la ragione lo vuole, bisognando che tre volte la fortuna abbandoni, o che 'l nemico abbia tanta virtù che tre volte vinca, s'ei vuol superare un'armata che tre volte si rinforza».

29 This latter attitude is embraced by GUTHRIE, *Battles*, p. 25, who interprets the abandonment of the standard checkerboard deployment for such «an unconventional battleline» as a way «to counter the greater width of the Swedish line», this width being dictated by the spaces between the different units. In *Ibid.*, p. 34, the author also adds that Montecuccoli's obser-

regard Barker and Guthrie assign to Tilly's army 31.300 to 31.400 troops, 8.731 to 10.000 fewer than the enemy's.³⁰

Wilson, on the contrary, has recently provided a way more even estimate, with 37.000 Imperial-Leaguist men against the 38.000 Swedish-Saxons:³¹ this picture also lends credence to the idea that, far from being reluctantly forced to accept battle, Tilly actively sought it.³² Therefore, the single line deployment at Breitenfeld could be presumably interpreted as an attempt by a commander fully confident in the superiority of his veterans to exert at once a decisive pressure on the enemy:³³ a conclusion consistent with the aggressiveness showed by Tilly in his entire career.

According to Pieri, the second teaching Montecuccoli allegedly deduced from Breitenfeld was that the offensive power of the massive pike squares was limited and these formations should be therefore replaced by linear ones;³⁴ indeed Pieri's conclusions were affected by the reconstruction of the battle proposed by Opitz and Delbrück, one in which the difference between the reputedly 6.000 strong "tercios" and the Swedish brigades was even more striking. Of course, Montecuccoli's preference for linear formations, around 6-men deep, remains unquestioned: firstly, because only six ranks of pikemen wielding a 18-foot long pike could bear their arms against the enemy, with the successive ranks unable to come to contact with them and thus constituting a waste of manpower;³⁵ second-

variations fail to consider that Tilly was outnumbered and compelled to confront an enemy deployed on a much wider front. Both these remarks are true, but not to the extent Guthrie believes them to be true.

30 BARKER, *Military Intellectual*, p. 175; GUTHRIE, *Battles*, pp. 20-23.

31 WILSON, *Thirty Years War*, p. 473.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 832, note 32. Wilson comes to this conclusion by analysing the correspondence between Tilly and Maximilian I of Bavaria.

33 Tilly had sound reasons for feeling confident in his army, coming from an eleven-years long streak of uninterrupted triumphs; as Parrott puts it, «it is naïve to seek explanations for the protestant – German, Dutch and Danish – defeats in terms of tactical theory [...] The simpler explanation is that of Clausewitz's "Military Spirit": an army of veterans, habituated to a long series of wars and victories, possessed an inherent superiority over its contemporary rivals that no amount of tactical readjustment can offset», see: PARROTT, "Strategy and Tactics", in CLIFFORD (ed.), *The Military Revolution*, p. 234

34 PIERI, *Guerra e politica*, p. 88.

35 MONTECUCCOLI, "Delle battaglie", in LURAGHI (ed.), *Opere*, II, p. 27: «e la sesta [fila] arriva giustamente colla punta della sua picca al pari della prima fila, o qualche poco fuori, [...] onde l'altre file non possono adoperare la lor arma, e son inutili».

ly, because such smaller formations were more flexible, could bear more pikes and shots against the enemy and could be arrayed in larger fronts due to the intervals between them.³⁶

These observations, though, cannot be put into immediate relationship with the lessons imparted by Breitenfeld and should be more correctly traced back to the gradual rise during the war of «broadly similar tactics, with the concept of a distinct ‘Swedish system’ persisting largely thanks to it being enshrined in printed tactical manuals».³⁷ More than the ultimate proponent of «a great military art, that of Gustavus Adolphus» who managed to carry to its extremes,³⁸ Montecuccoli formalised a tactical thought reflecting this common tactical system: a system stemming, on one side, from the reforms of the Imperial Army tentatively initiated by Wallenstein shortly before the battle of Lützen; on the other from the abandonment of the complex Swedish brigade on three squadrons shortly after the demise of Gustavus Adolphus, its main proponent.³⁹

Montecuccoli and the Oblique Order

A third teaching can be added to the two already exposed: that the contemporary battles were usually decided on the wings, not in the centre where the amassed cold steel of the pikemen and the firepower of the musketeers were likely to produce more a bloody stalemate than a decision. Pieri acutely stresses that «by now it becomes the norm that the pikes, with their sleeves of musketeers, stay in the centre with an almost exclusively passive function: that of firmly standing in place. The swift, overwhelming attack, in other words the decision, is entrusted to the cavalry on both wings».⁴⁰ Montecuccoli, always a perspicuous

36 *Ibid.*, p. 29: «e in effetto le piccole truppe [...] hanno questo vantaggio, che più gente può combattere in una volta. La fronte viene a stendersi più, a causa dell’intervalli che sono fra le truppe [...] et esse vi si possono maneggiare più comodamente e con minor confusione per essere meno grosse».

37 Peter H. WILSON, *Lützen*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 103.

38 PIERI, *Guerra e politica*, p. 108: «Nel Montecuccoli insomma non troviamo lo spirito innovatore che precorre l’avvenire, ma soprattutto lo sforzo di ricavare da un’arte militare luminosa, ma ormai al tramonto, le estreme possibilità [...] Montecuccoli è pur sempre il propugnatore di una grande arte militare, quella di Gustavo Adolfo».

39 WILSON, *Lützen*, pp. 49-50, 59-61.

40 PIERI, *Guerra e politica*, pp. 73-74: «ormai diventa norma che le picche, colle loro maniche di moschettieri, rimangono al centro, con una funzione quasi soltanto passiva: restare

commentator of the state of the contemporary military affairs, in his second treatise *Delle battaglie* similarly notes that «on the basis of experience, in all the feats of arms of our time in Germany or in Flanders, victory always went to those who managed to break first the wings of the enemy cavalry; because once the latter is defeated, the infantry is then encircled and it does not have the means or the resolution for defending itself».⁴¹

This dynamic is reproduced by the battle of Breitenfeld, when most of the Swedish infantry⁴² and roughly half of the Imperial-Leaguist foot stood idly in the centre, not involved in the salient manoeuvres of the day.⁴³ Montecuccoli notes that «at the battle of Lepizig [Breitenfeld] the right wing of the Imperial Army smashed the enemy left, that is the Saxon Army; but the left wing was broken by the enemy right, that is the Swedish Army. By then both of them had an advantage but, given the fact that the Imperials, after routing the Saxons, were plunged into disarray, while the Swedes managed to stick together, the latter won the battle».⁴⁴

While the tenuous link between Breitenfeld and the advocacy of linear forma-

saldamente al loro posto. L'attacco rapido, travolgente, la decisione, insomma, è devoluta alla cavalleria alle due ali.»

41 Raimondo MONTECUCCOLI, “Delle battaglie. Secondo trattato”, in LURAGHI (ed.), *Opere*, II, p. 601: «et abbiamo per isperienza che in tutti li fatti d'arme seguiti ne' nostri tempi nella Germania e nella Fiandra, la vittoria è sempre stata di quegli ch'ha prima rotto l'ale della Cavalleria opposta, perché battuta quella, la Fanteria viene poi circondata, né ha più mezzo o voglia di difendersi». The manuscript of this second treatise bears the year 1673 as a date of composition, most probably written by the author himself. In the preface, however, Montecuccoli states to have taken for guidance in elucidating the tactical principles «the experience of 22 years of war in Germany» («l'esperienza di 22 anni di guerra nella Germania»), leading Raimondo Luraghi to suppose that at least the first draft of the treatise should have been composed already in 1651-53. See: LURAGHI (ed.), *Opere*, II, pp. 583-584. Regardless of the dating of the second *Delle battaglie*, that the author declares to have taken advantage chiefly of the experience gained during the Thirty Years War implies that such a work is still significant in reconstructing general ideas and practices characterising the conduct of the operations back at that time.

42 BARKER, *Military Intellectual*, p. 180.

43 GUTHRIE, *Battles*, pp. 29-30.

44 MONTECUCCOLI, “Delle battaglie”, in LURAGHI (ed.), *Opere*, II, p. 59: «nella battaglia di Leipzig il corno destro dell'Esercito imperiale ruppe il manco dell'inimico, ch'era l'Armata di Sassonia, ma il corno sinistro fu rotto dal destro dell'inimico, ch'era l'Armata svedese; ora il vantaggio era eguale dall'una parte e dall'altra, ma perché gli Imperiali doppo aver rotto i sassoni, si disordinarono et i svedesi si tennero insieme, questi guadagnarono la battaglia».

tions has been vigorously stressed, the relationship of the battle with the celebrated *oblique order*, appearing in the first treatise *Delle battaglie* in a still sketched-out formulation, is way more significant. All the more because Montecuccoli illustrates it right before introducing the aforementioned clash of the wings at Breitenfeld as a related historical example: «some captains, when they knew that the enemy had made strong a side of the battalia, decided to oppose it not with their strongest body, but with their weakest, and they opposed the strongest side to the [enemy] weakest. Then, in taking the offensive, they directed the strongest body to just contain the enemy without pushing it; and the weakest body to cede and withdraw. This induces two kinds of great chaos in the enemy: firstly, that they end up with the strongest body surrounded; secondly, that with the victory apparently at hand, [the enemy] seldom fails to fall in disarray, wherefrom their sudden defeat derives». ⁴⁵ In this regard Pieri is right: at least in this early stage of his tactical thought Montecuccoli shows to be influenced by a kind of defensive-counteroffensive model, stemming directly from the experience on the battlefield of Breitenfeld. ⁴⁶

Therefore, the aim of the oblique order is still to make the bulk of the enemy forces get overstretched and in disarray by means of a careful withdrawal, waiting for the most opportune moment to surround and annihilate it with a timely counterstroke: whether the flanking attack of Tilly, or the mounted counterattack of Gustavus Adolphus were planned beforehand or improvised, ⁴⁷ this is what roughly happened at Breitenfeld. We are far from the theorisation of the second *Delle battaglie*, when the oblique order is no more defensive-counteroffensive but purely offensive, and the forces concentrated on the chosen wing are meant to attack, outflank the enemy and roll-up their entire front: ⁴⁸ a concept, in turn,

45 *Ibid.*, p. 59: «alcuni capitani, quando hanno conosciuto che il nimico ha fatto forte un lato della battaglia, non gli hanno opposto la parte più forte, ma la più debole e l'altra più forte hanno opposta alla più debole; poi nell'appicare la zuffa hanno commandato alla loro parte più gagliarda che solamente [contenga] il nemico, e non lo spinga, et alla più debole che ceda, e si ritiri: questo genera due grandi disordini al nemico, [il primo è] ch'egli si trova la sua parte più gagliarda circondata; il secondo è che parendogli avere la vittoria subito, rade volte è che non si disordini, d'onde ne nasce la sua subita perdita».

46 PIERI, *Guerra e politica*, p. 93.

47 GUTHRIE, *Battles*, p. 25: the author notes that, although both Tilly and Gustavus Adolphus left brief accounts of the battle, none of these documents cares to explain their respective plans.

48 Raimondo MONTECUCCOLI, “Delle battaglie. Secondo trattato”, in LURAGHI (ed.), *Opere*, II,



Portrait of Johann Georg von Arnim (Arnheim) as General of the Saxon Army.
Austrian Bildarchiv. Wikimedia Commons.

conducive to the terse Frederician summing-up, in which it is clearly stated that «by refusing or holding back one wing to the enemy and reinforcing the attacking wing, you can hit the enemy wing that you can wish to take in flank with the bulk of your forces».⁴⁹

The Renewed Importance of Cavalry

Hence, far from declining because of the ascendancy of the infantry consecrated by the Italian Wars, the cavalry saw its importance growing in view of its ability to break the stalemate on the battlefield brought about by the pike and shot tactics of the foot. One can appreciate the increasing reliance on the mounted arm by examining its growth pattern throughout the last phase of the war – approximately from after the battle of Nördlingen on – even though such a growth was only in part dictated by tactical considerations: the logistical constraints were paramount, because cavalry was able to requisition food and fodder over a wider area, thus saving from starvation armies bound to operate in territories ravaged and depopulated by years of military operations. Ronald Asch shows that after 1635 «in Germany many armies now had as many horsemen as foot soldiers or even more, whereas in the earlier years of the war the cavalry had normally made up 15 and 25, or at most 35 per cent of the fighting forces».⁵⁰ Of course, this changing reality reverberates through Montecuccoli's writings, with Barker stressing that his “model army” of the first period counted 24.000 foot and 8.000 horses, while in the second period «the number of foot is reduced to 9.000, whereas the Reiters climb to 11.000».⁵¹

Significantly we see this trend involving the Spanish Army as well, whose main theatre of operation was represented by Flanders: after 1630 logistical and tactical needs conspired to highlight the shortcomings of the Spanish forces, whose mounted arm has always been considered their chief weak point.⁵² The

pp. 614-616.

49 Jay LUYVAAS (ed.), *Frederick the Great on the Art of War*, New York, Da Capo Press, 1999, pp. 176-177.

50 Ronald G. ASCH, “Warfare in the Age of the Thirty Years War, 1598-1648”, in Jeremy BLACK (ed.), *European Warfare, 1453-1815*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999, p. 57.

51 BARKER, *Military Intellectual*, p. 60.

52 Davide MAFFI, *En defensa del Imperio. Los ejércitos de Felipe IV y la guerra por la hegemonía europea (1635-1659)*, Madrid, Actas Editorial, 2014, pp. 204-205.

defeat of Rocroi in 1643, when the Spanish cavalry was routed by the French thus leaving the Spanish infantry to its fate, and that of Lens in 1648 when the horses bolted without firing a single shot,⁵³ show the difficulties of an infantry-centric army coming to grips with mutated operational conditions which highlighted the need for a strong cavalry. Indeed, the questionable reliability of the Spanish horse did not fail to attract the inquisitive eye of Montecucoli, who observes that «at the battle of Nördlingen, where the Spanish cavalry [...] accustomed to fight that way, that is caracoling, even though commanded by Gambacorta, a soldier of renown, was way more derided than lauded because they did not damage the enemy at all».⁵⁴ This historical example is cited in the section of *Delle battaglie* dealing with the light cavalry, where the author shows a marked antipathy for the caracole: a tactic which has seldom earned praise.⁵⁵

The reasons for this mistrust are specified further on, by saying that «the purpose why [the caracole] was invented, that is to open some gaps with the carbines in the enemy formations liable to be more easily exploited by the lancers and the cuirassiers, can be way better accomplished by the musketeers». Therefore, according to Montecucoli, the caracole came down to offer a convenient excuse to those who were unwilling to get close to the enemy and engage them.⁵⁶ In

53 *Ibid.*, p. 209.

54 MONTECUCOLI, “Delle battaglie”, in LURAGHI (ed.), *Opere*, II, p. 46: «nella battaglia di Nördlingen, dove la Cavalleria spagnola avvezza a combattere in quel modo caracollando, benché guidata da Gambacorta, soldato di riputazione, fu in ogni modo più tosto derisa, che pregiata, perché non danneggiava punto il nemico».

55 An interesting exception is in Archer JONES, *The Art of War in the Western World*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2001, pp. 196-198. Jones praises the Reiters as flexible troops due to the capability of combining fire and shock tactics according to the circumstances; this new kind of cavalry – requiring the caracole an intense drilling to be correctly performed – was way more disciplined, cohesive and responsive to commands than the traditional Gendarmes. Jones maintains that the wheel-lock pistol was useful chiefly for caracoling against a body of infantry in order to open some gaps liable to be exploited by the cold steel. On the contrary, Bert Hall maintains – especially on the authority of François de La Noue – that the pistol-armed Reiter proved to be particularly lethal for the traditional lancer in the mêlée between opposing cavalries, thus marking the disappearance of the Gendarmes: Bert S. HALL, *Weapons and Warfare in Renaissance Europe*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, pp. 194-197.

56 MONTECUCOLI, “Delle battaglie”, in LURAGHI (ed.), *Opere*, II, p. 47: «perché molti, che non hanno gran voglia di venir alle mani e di mischiarsi, fingono d'essere stati impediti quando anche non lo siano stati e si servono volentieri di questo pretesto per ricoprire la viltà loro».

order to bolster his opinion the author had already provided two examples that are, to a certain extent, at odds with historical truth: that Tilly was accustomed to say he had always refused to make use of the mounted arquebusiers during a pitched battle; and that Wallenstein, after the dismal performance of his arquebusiers at Lützen, had ordered all those regiments to be disbanded and reformed as cuirassiers.⁵⁷ As for Tilly we have no way to prove if he really said the words Montecuccoli ascribes to him, but we know for sure that the Imperial-Leaguist Army deployed five mounted arquebusier regiments at Breitenfeld.⁵⁸ As for Wallenstein, instead, it is true that the arquebusiers failed him; such a failure, though, should be better ascribed to the fact that they were composed of raw recruits, not because of some shortcomings inherent in that class of cavalry.⁵⁹

Questions on Montecuccoli's historical reliability concerning these two passages notwithstanding, his tactical thought about the handling of the cavalry is pretty clear and the refusal of the caracole is expressed in the most forceful way: for example, by pointing out that «such an ill-conceived way of fighting is more effective for playing at hide-and-seek than for battling with good judgement».⁶⁰ Whether Pappenheim's cavalry at Breitenfeld caracolled against the Swedish right wing or not,⁶¹ whether the caracole was discontinued by the Imperial Army be-

57 *Ibid.*, p. 56: «Il Tilly [...] soleva dire ch'ei non s'avria mai volsuto servire d'Archibugieri in una battaglia; ed è memorabile l'osservazione del Friedland [...] e tale era il tenore: che avend'egli visto in effetti nella battaglia di Lützen quanto danno gli avevano cagionato i suoi Archibugieri, i quali con i loro caracolli, non solo non avevano punto danneggiato l'inimico, ma di più, o avevano disordinato l'altre truppe rovesciandosi sopra di loro, o l'avevano impedito mentre ch'elle andavano alla carica, comandava assolutamente, che tutti i colonnelli di Cavalleria dovessero intieramente riformare le carabine, et armare i loro reggimenti di corazze».

58 GUTHRIE, *Battles*, pp. 35-36.

59 WILSON, *Lützen*, pp. 51, 102.

60 MONTECUCCOLI, «Delle battaglie», in LURAGHI (ed.), *Opere*, II, pp. 86-87: «e però questo modo di combattere mal inventato è più proficuo per giuocar a bomba che per azzuffarsi da senno». Therefore the author directs the cuirassiers not to caracole in any case («né devono in modo alcuno pigliar le pistole alla mano per girar il fianco a 20 passi dall'inimico e per scaricare sopra di lui una salva come hanno fatto alcuni volendo poi rifar un gran circuito per ricaricare»): a curious remark, if we consider that the first *Delle battaglie* is presumed to be written in 1645 while, according to the received historical wisdom, the imperial cuirassiers discontinued the caracole shortly before the battle of Lützen in 1632: see WILSON, *Lützen*, p. 50.

61 See GUTHRIE, *Battles*, pp. 27-28, for a traditional recounting of the clash on the Imperial left wing, with Pappenheim's cuirassiers caracoling for seven times against the Swedes

fore Lützen or not, when it comes to cavalry Montecucoli is undoubtedly an adept of shock tactics.

The Elusiveness of Battle

The diverse tactical lessons examined up to now and deriving from the battle of Breitenfeld, however, elude the one fundamental question: that is, the reason why field battles came to be a key feature in the combat experience of Montecucoli. Admittedly, in the early modern warfare the pitched battle was the exception in the conduct of the military operations, with the rule represented by other forms of war, ranging from the mere cavalry skirmish between foraging parties to the

and being repelled for seven times. This reconstruction cannot be refuted on the basis of the available historical documentation, but I am inclined to think that such a dynamic is also consistent with an alternative interpretation: one in which the Imperial cuirassiers charged for seven times against the Swedish line only to be repulsed by the detachments of “commanded” musketeers interspersed between the cavalry squadrons, one of the most innovative features of the Swedish tactical system. Unable to overcome or even resist to the steady fire of the foot – more accurate and intense than the one usually provided by the mounted arquebusiers and by the wheel-lock pistols of the Reiters – the cuirassiers were compelled to dodge at the very last moment, thus giving the impression of performing a caracole. In this regard, Monro in *Id.*, *His Expedition*, p. 65, says that «the Horsemen on both wings charged furiously one another, our Horsemen with a resolution, abiding unloosing a Pistoll, till the enemy had discharged first, and then at a neere distance our Musketers meeting them with a *Salve*; then our horsemen discharged their Pistolls, and then charged through them with swords; and at their returne the Musketers were ready againe to give the second *Salve* of Musket amongst them; the enemy thus valiantly resisted by our Horsemen, and cruelly plagued by our Plottons of Musketers; you may imagine, how soone he would be discouraged after charging twice in this manner, and repulsed». The author further adds in *Ibid.*, p. 67 that «The fourth helpe to this victory, was the plottons of Musketers, his Majesty had very wisely ordained to attend the horsemen, being a great safety for them, and a great prejudice to the enemy, the Musket ball carrying and piercing farther than the Pistolet». Indeed, I am aware that such a suggestion of mine is contradicted by the received wisdom of an Imperial cavalry accustomed to caracole up until Lützen and then discontinuing this tactic shortly before the battle. However, I am inclined to think that the usual periodisation is too strict and schematic, in part because it was shaped by one of the main tenets of the Military Revolution thesis: that is, the stress on the shift from the “backward” caracole of old to the “progressive” cold steel tactics allegedly revived by Gustavus Adolphus. This reading does not take into account the existence of some degree of tactical flexibility and I believe that a more thorough examination of all the battles of the period might show that different tactical solutions were used by the same troops according to different needs and circumstances. A higher degree of tactical flexibility would also be able to explain why, as late as 1645, Montecucoli felt the need of stigmatising the caracole way after its accepted demise in 1632.

drawn-out and expensive siege of a fortress. Although dedicating two treatises to the set-piece battle, Montecuccoli was the first one to recognise that it usually represented a rare occurrence: «the Romans fought more battles than sieges because they understood that by routing an army they conquered a kingdom in a day, while in besieging a redoubtable city they spent years, so that in the antiquity the main operations of a war were decided on the battlefield, whence the sudden conquest or loss of the countries came; nowadays war is led more in the manner of a fox than of a lion, and the actions are made up more by trying to surprise, assault or defend the fortresses than by engaging battle. However, the Turks and the Persians still decide the outcome of their wars chiefly through by battles, and among the Christians many were fought in Germany in the course of few years: perhaps [this happened] because the fortresses are not so common there as in Southern Germany and Italy».⁶²

Montecuccoli's explanation may sound simplistic, but fortifications really had a stymieing effect on field operations: they managed to curtail the breadth and slow down the pace of the manoeuvre, while providing a safe haven for the armies unwilling to risk battle. Such a state of affairs was particularly apparent in the Low Countries, especially since the spread of the *bastion fort* had managed to turn them «into one of the most densely fortified areas in Europe».⁶³ Montecuccoli himself, whose baptism of fire had taken place in Flanders during the 1629

62 Raimondo MONTECUCCOLI, “Trattato della guerra”, in Raimondo LURAGHI (ed.), *Le opere di Raimondo Montecuccoli*, vol. I, Roma, Ufficio Storico SME, p. 234: “i Romani facevano più battaglie che assedi perché vedevano che per una rotta dell’armata nimica guadagnavano un Reame in un giorno et a espugnare per assedio una città ostinata consumavano gli anni, sì che anticamente le principali azioni della guerra si decidevano in campagna, da che procedevano gli subiti acquisti o la subita perdita dei paesi; ora si fà la guerra più da volpe che da lione, e l’azioni consistono più a sorprendere, assalire e diffender piazze che a combatter a giornata. Nondimeno i Turchi et i Persi anche oggidì decidono la più parte delle lor guerre per battaglie e fra Cristiani se ne sono date parecchie in Alemagna in poch’anni: forse perché le piazze forti non vi sono sì frequenti che nell’Italia e nella Germania inferiore».

63 Olaf van NIMWEGEN, “Maurits van Nassau and Siege Warfare (1590-1597)”, in VAN DE HOEVEN (ed.) *Exercise of Arms*, p. 118. Nimwegen stresses that Maurice of Nassau is usually remembered for his victory at the battle of Nieuwpoort, despite the fact that his major contribution to the cause of Dutch independence rested on «the perfection and reorganisation of the siege warfare». Of the same opinion is Christopher Duffy, in Id., *Siege Warfare. The Fortress in the Early Modern World, 1494-1660*, London and New York, Routledge, 1997, p. 81: «As regards siege warfare his main contribution was to put things on a businesslike footing».

MONRO
 HIS EXPEDITION
 VVITH THE VVORTHY
 SCOTS REGIMENT (CALLED
Mac-Keyes Regiment) levied in *August 1626.*

by *S. Donald Mac-Key* Lord *Rhees*, Colonell for
 his Majesties service of *Denmark*, and reduced
 after the Battaille of *Nerling*, to one Com-
 pany in *September 1634.* at
Wormes in the Paliz.

Discharged in severall Duties and Observati ns of service
 first under the magnanimous King of *Denmark*, during his warres
 against the Emperour; afterward, under the Invincible King of
Sweden, during his Majesties life time; and since, under the
 Directour Generall, the Rex-chancellor *Oxenjerne*
 a is Generalls.

Collected and gathered together at spare-houres, by Colonell
 ROBERT MONRO, at first Lievetenant under the
said Regiment, to the Noble and worthy Captaine,
 THOMAS MAC-KENYER, of *Kildon*, Bro-
 ther to the noble Lord, the Lord Earle of
Seafort; for the use of all worshie
Cavaliers favouring the laudable,
profession of Armes.

To which is annexed the Abridgement of Exercise, and di-
 vers practical Observations, for the younger Officer
his Consideration; ending with the Souldiers
 Meditations going on service.



LONDON,
 Printed by *William Jones* in Red-Crosse streete.
 1637.

Monro, His Expedition with the worthy Scots Regiment
(called Mac-Keyes Regiment), 1637.

campaign aimed at relieving the beleaguered Spanish stronghold of ‘s-Hertogenbosch,⁶⁴ recognised «that the safeguard of the States rests chiefly upon fortresses is a common maxim of any sound politician [...] and the States of Holland would have not been able to fend off such a mighty Monarch who had assailed them for so long without fortresses».⁶⁵

As testified by captain John Bingham, an English veteran of the Dutch Army,⁶⁶ the building of this «dense network of fortified strongholds»⁶⁷ has as a result that «our actions in Warre are onely now a dayes and sieges oppugnations of Cities; Battailes wee heare not of, saue onely of a few in *France*, and that of *Newport* in the Low-Countries».⁶⁸ Fortifications could not be simply ignored and bypassed, because leaving them astride the lines of communication of an advancing army exposed the latter to the danger of being harassed and cut by the enemy garrisons.⁶⁹ The disrupting effect strongholds had on military operations can be observed not just by taking into consideration the theatre of operations represented by the Low Countries, because the Thirty Years War in Germany offers some telling examples as well: during the 1632 campaign the failed storming of the electoral fortress of Ingolstadt costed Gustavus Adolphus almost as many men as the forced crossing at the Lech, putting any further penetration in Austria to

64 Galeazzo GUALDO PRIORATO, “Vita, et Azzioni di Raimondo Conte di Montecuccoli”, in Id., *Vite, et Azzioni di Personaggi Militari, e Politici*, Vienna, Appresso Michele Thurnmayer, 1674, nonpaginated: «d’indi passò in Fiandra al soccorso di Bolduc [Bois-le-Duc], assediato dagl’Olandesi col conte Ernesto Montecuccoli suo cugino».

65 Raimondo MONTECUCCOLI, “Discorso sopra le fortezze, che si dovriano avere negli Stati di S. M. Cesarea”, in Andrea TESTA (ed.), *Le opere di Raimondo Montecuccoli*, vol. III, Roma, Ufficio Storico SME, 2000, p. 100: «che il mantenimento degli Stati consista principalmente nelle fortezze, è una massima generale di ogni buon sensato Politico [...] né gli stati d’Ollanda avriano potuto diffendersi tanto tempo dalla forza d’un potentissimo Monarca, che gli assaliva senza il favore delle fortezze».

66 Olaf van NIMWEGEN, *The Dutch Army and the Military Revolutions, 1588-1688*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2010, pp. 289-290.

67 Petra GROEN (ed.), *The Eighty Years War. From Revolt to Regular War, 1568-1648*, Leiden, Leiden University Press, 2019, p. 300.

68 John BINGHAM, *The Art of Embattailing an Army, or the Second Part of Aelians Tacticks, with Notes upon Every Chapter*, London, Printed by John Beale and Thomas Brudenell for Ralph Mab., 1629, page unnumbered of the Epistle Dedicatory.

69 As Montecuccoli put it, «[le fortezze] assicurano le frontiere, acciocché il nimico faccia difficoltà di lasciar dietro una piazza che possa incommodar i viveri»; see MONTECUCCOLI, “Trattato della guerra”, in LURAGHI (ed.) *Opere*, I, p. 218.

an end and letting Wallenstein to seize the initiative in Saxony;⁷⁰ in 1645 the resistance of Brünn halted the Swedish advance at a critical juncture, with the road to Vienna standing open after Lennart Torstensson had managed to destroy the Imperial Army at the battle of Jankau.⁷¹

The Logistical Constraints

Fortifications were not just a hindrance to the lines of communication of an invading army; they represented the key to the control of the territories whose resources – primarily food and fodder – the army was compelled to exploit in order to bolster and supplement its usually flimsy logistics and thus survive while campaigning. Therefore, failing to put on a permanent footing the exploitation of the area an army was bound to operate upon, usually amounted to condemn it to dissolution: voicing an opinion which must have sounded like shared wisdom back at the time, Montecuccoli stressed that «a starving army cannot observe any discipline, as we unfortunately experienced during this war, and more armies were destroyed by hunger than by battle».⁷²

Given the circumstances outlined up to now, it seems reasonable to conclude that battles appeared as a viable option only when and if territorial control guar-

70 BARKER, *Military Intellectual*, p. 184; WILSON, *Thirty Years War*, p. 500. About the strategic importance of Ingolstadt, Montecuccoli notes that «diffendosi gli stati: [...] mediocri, che possono aver un'armata in piede, si difendono con questa e colle fortezze: quella senza queste è forzata ad abbandonar il paese, questa senza quelle non possono mantenersi se non tanto quanto durano le provvigioni fatte. In questo modo si sono mantenute la Baviera con Ingolstadt [...]», in Raimondo MONTECUCCOLI, “Tavole militari”, in LURAGHI (ed.), *Opere*, II, p. 148.

71 William P. GUTHRIE, *The Later Thirty Years War. From the Battle of Wittstock to the Treaty of Westphalia*, Westport, Connecticut – London, Greenwood Press, 2003, pp. 141-144; also see MONTECUCCOLI, “Discorso sopra le fortezze”, in TESTA (ed.), *Opere*, III, p. 100: «una sola città di Freiberg, nella mischia trattenne tanto tempo l'Armata del Torstensohn, doppo l'ultima battaglia di Leipsig, che diede commodità agli Imperiali di rimettere l'essercito insieme, di soccorrere le piazze, e di far perdere a lui tutto il frutto della vittoria. E così fece ancora Brunn nella Moravia doppo la battaglia di Janckau».

72 MONTECUCCOLI, “Trattato della guerra”, in LURAGHI (ed.), *Opere*, I, p. 283: «un essercito digiuno non può osservare la disciplina, il che purtroppo si sperimenta in questa guerra, e più armate sono state distrutte per la fame che per le zuffe». This observation echoes almost literally that of Richelieu, according to whom «il se trouve en l'histoire beaucoup plus d'armées periées faute de pain et de police que par l'effort des armes ennemies», in Louis ANDRÉ (ed.), *Testament politique du cardinal de Richelieu*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1947, p. 280.

anted by fortifications was weak or could be significantly weakened by swiftly overcoming the main strongpoints. For that matter, such an interpretation would be in agreement with the explanation advanced by Bert Hall about the rise of open field warfare during the Italian Wars: a phenomenon linked by the author to the evolution of artillery and the possibility of easily reducing the old castles, shattering with them the traditional prevalence of the defence.⁷³

Of course, this picture provided by Hall needs to be nuanced by stressing that battles shewed quite an early tendency to be dominated by field fortifications. Frederick Taylor already noted that, since the ditch devised by Fabrizio and Prospero Colonna on the field of Cerignola in 1503, «every battle took the form of an attack on an entrenched camp»:⁷⁴ this basically means that field battles and siege operations, the two fundamental forms of war identified by Montecuccoli,⁷⁵ started to converge again.⁷⁶ Then, the emergence of the *bastion fort* managed to restore «the status quo ante [and] led back to the older ways of battle avoidance and reliance on garrisons to control territory»;⁷⁷ but, it may be added to integrate this interpretation, wherever the spread of the new cannon-resistant forts did not lead to the heavy fortification of the territory,⁷⁸ seeking out battle in the open

73 HALL, *Weapons and Warfare*, pp. 164-165.

74 Frederick L. TAYLOR, *The Art of War in Italy, 1494-1529*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1921, p. 110.

75 MONTECUCCOLI, “Trattato della guerra”, in LURAGHI (ed.), *Opere*, I, p. 234: «l'azione della guerra si fà intorno alle fortezze, o nella campagna».

76 Noteworthy examples of this trend can be identified in the Thirty Years War as well: Wallenstein, a commander who – as correctly observed by Pieri – never gave a properly offensive battle in his entire career, had a penchant for naturally strong positions bolstered by field fortifications. During the 1632 campaign he compelled Gustavus Adolphus to seek out a decision on the battlefield by systematically pillaging Saxony; then, he inflicted a serious reverse to the Swedes, fighting a purely defensive action from the entrenchments of Alte Veste. At the battle of Nördlingen, in 1634, the Protestants lost the day when they failed to take the redoubts erected by the Spanish infantry on the Albuch Hill, the key position for outflanking the left wing of the Catholic Army and cutting its lines of communication to the Danube. See Alberto Raúl Esteban RIBAS, *The Battle of Nördlingen, 1634. The Bloody Fight between Tercios and Brigades*, Warwick, Helion and Company, 2021, pp. 134-144; PIERI, *Guerra e politica*, p. 74, n. 1; WILSON, *Thirty Years War*, pp. 504-506.

77 HALL, *Weapons and Warfare*, p. 165.

78 For instance, because of financial constraints. The economic burden of the *bastion fort*, seen through the case study represented by Siena, has been thoroughly examined in Nicholas ADAMS, Simon PEPPER, *Firearms and Fortifications. Military Architecture and Siege Warfare in Sixteenth-Century Siena*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986.

or being compelled to accept it was still an option. It can be also guessed that – given of course the right circumstances – seeking out battle whenever possible was generally assumed to be most desirable. Montecuccoli famously writes that «seeking out battle is the most glorious and important of war actions, because winning one or two battles conquers or overthrows whole empires, and an army that does not fear to give battle has a marvellous advantage in pursuing every plan over the one that fears it».⁷⁹

Why Seeking Out Battle

Despite relying on a far different combat experience, that of the wearing siege warfare typical of the Low Countries and devoid of significant field actions, the already mentioned Bingham expresses a similar point of view: «nor is there any Conquest to be made without Battailes. He that is Master of the field, may dispose of his affaires as he listeth; hee may spoyle the Enemies Countrey at his pleasure, he may march where he thinket best, he may lay siege to what Towne he is disposed, he may raise any siege that the Enemy hath layed against him or his».⁸⁰ After enumerating all the possible reasons for seeking out battle or avoiding it, Montecuccoli briefly states that «the one who wins the battle, wins not only the campaign, but also gain a large part of the country»:⁸¹ therefore, among the possible reasons for risking an engagement, we have to concede that one in particular stands out, related to the possibility evoked by Bingham of spoiling the enemy country at pleasure. As stressed by David Parrott, «campaigns reflected this simple logistical imperative: battles were about the control of territory with supply potential, not the culmination of any overall strategy clearly and directly related to the state's war-aims».⁸² Hence, in the end, both the «azione della guerra intorno [...] alle fortezze, o nella campagna» were aimed at feeding armies often on the brink of logistical collapse.

79 MONTECUCCOLI, “Trattato della guerra”, in LURAGHI (ed.), *Opere*, I, p. 388: «di tutte le azioni della guerra la più gloriosa e la più importante è di dar battaglia, perché il guadagno d'una o di due acquista o rovescia gli imperi intieri, e però un essercito che non teme la giornata ha un meraviglioso vantaggio in tutti i suoi disegni contro a quello che la teme».

80 BINGHAM, *Art of Embattailing*, page unnumbered.

81 MONTECUCCOLI, “Trattato della guerra”, in LURAGHI (ed.), *Opere*, I, p. 388: «chi guadagna la giornata non solo guadagna la campagna, ma anche un gran pezzo di paese».

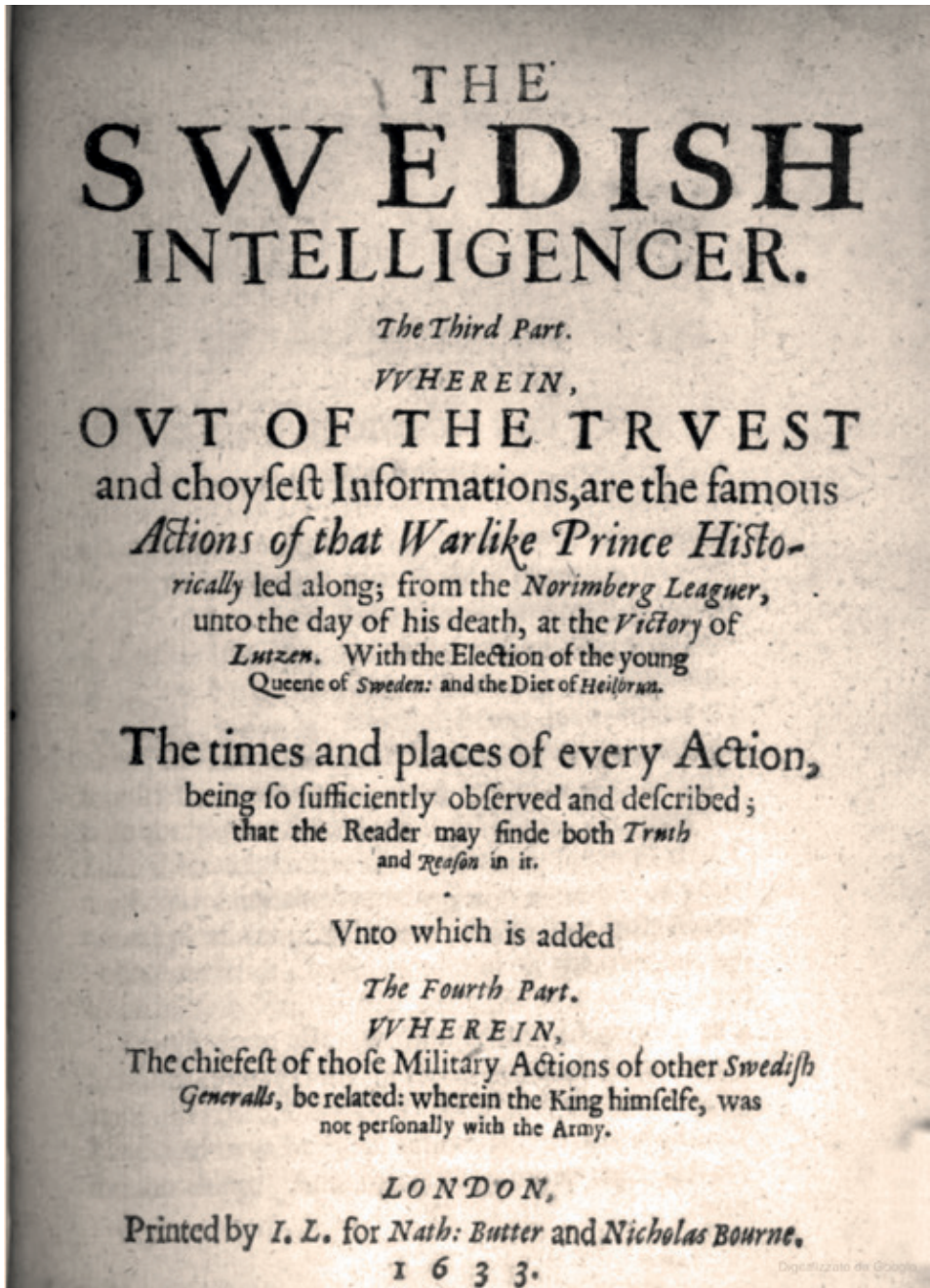
82 PARROTT, “Strategy and Tactics”, in CLIFFORD (ed.) *The Military Revolution*, p. 243.

The limits of the crude logistics of the day represented the most pressing hindrance to the development of the military operations. Montecuccoli seems to be aware of this state of affairs even though, it must be noted, in his *Trattato della guerra* he does not put any particular emphasis on it and simply observes that one of the reasons for seeking out battle is «when the army is particularly strong, and the winter is coming, and the country is ravaged by your soldiers and the enemy's ones, [so that] it cannot provide supplies to such a multitude»; admittedly, this was also one of the reasons behind the battle of Breitenfeld, with «the Elector of Saxony [compelled] to seek out battle at Leipzig against the Imperials, alleging that with the enemy in control of the best part of the country, the rest could not provide means of survival to both his army and that of the King of Sweden».⁸³ Furthermore, as already stressed, the haphazard and chaotic logistics of the armies of the period, and the need to keep campaigning in territories ravaged by years of relentless operations, may contribute to explain the reason why, according to Montecuccoli, battle was only one of the many possible means to an end: glorious and important as it may be, «when the enemy can be won without a fight and without wounds, having cornered them in narrow places without provisions, why risking a battle that, even if won, always leads to losses? Why tempting fate?».⁸⁴ In such operational circumstances starving the enemy, that is, managing to cut their lines of communication and corner them in impoverished and depopulated areas, looked like a viable and convenient way for destroying them.

Indeed, Montecuccoli does not shrink from levelling criticism at those captains who failed to pursue such a strategy of attrition when opportune, Matteo

83 MONTECUCCOLI, "Trattato della guerra", in LURAGHI (ed.), *Opere*, I, p. 250: «quando l'armata è molto forte e che l'inverno è imminente e che 'l paese guasto da suoi propri da quei del nimico, non può supplire gli alimenti a tanta moltitudine, che fu anche una delle cagioni che mossero l'Elettor di Sassonia ad avventurare la battaglia di Leipzig contro agli Imperiali, allegando che tenendo il nemico la parte migliore del suo paese, il resto non potea fornir di vivere abbastanza alla sua armata et a quella del Re di Svezia». Parrott, in *Ibid.*, p. 244, comes to the same conclusion by using different sources: «Breitenfeld occurred, not because Gustavus Adolphus was confident of his capacity to defeat Tilly's veterans and anxious to seek out battle as quickly as possible, but because of the need to expand the Contribution-base of his own army and to deny Tilly the opportunity of using Saxony for the same purpose».

84 *Ibid.*, p. 241: «quando si può vincer il nimico senza pugna e senza ferite, avendolo ridotto in luoghi angusti dove gli si tagliano i viveri, perché azardar un combattimento nel quale benché prospero, si perde sempre qualcheduno dei suoi? E perché tentar la fortuna?».



The Swedish Intelligencer, Wherein, out of the truest and choycest informations, are the famous actions of that warlike Prince historically led along, 1632.

Galasso representing the most prominent case in the 1637 campaign: «the enemy can be led to a narrow, small country of scant trades in which you control the strongpoints, the passes and the coasts so to compel them, by cutting their provisions and keeping them surrounded and besieged, to accept battle or be ruined. In this respect, after expelling Banér from the Elbe and preventing him from gaining the access to Pomerania, Galasso failed: because if Galasso had managed to lay waste to Pomerania with a retrograde movement (something that could be easily accomplished, because Demmin was not fortified and could be immediately taken) and then cross the Oder back and enter in Mecklenburg, thus compelling Banér to fall back from the ravaged Pomerania, the Swedes would have starved».⁸⁵ As we see, according to Montecuccoli *cunctatio* and *guerra corta e grossa* were not mutually exclusive, rather one at the service of the other in a constant interplay: therefore, the conduct of an accomplished commander was supposed to move between these two poles according to the opportunities.

Pieri, Montecuccoli, and the Strategy of Attrition

A comprehensive understanding of Montecuccoli's thought, however, has been marred by the fact that Piero Pieri, by far his most authoritative interpreter,⁸⁶ seems to be lost to the real extent of the aforementioned logistical constraints and their repercussions on the military operations of the age. Pieri makes use of

85 *Ibid.*, p. 256: «Cercando di condurre il nimico in un paese stretto, picciolo, povero di commercio, o del quale tu tenga le piazze, i passaggi e le riviere, acciocché tagliando i viveri o tenendolo serrato et assediato, sia costretto di venir a battaglia o di rovinare. Et in questo punto mancò Galasso dopo aver cacciato Banér dall'Elba e proibitoli l'entrar nella Pomerania, perché se il Galasso avesse dato allora il guasto alla Pomerania di dietro (facil cosa a metter in esecuzione, perché Demmin non era fortificata e potea pigliarsi subito) poi fosse ripassato l'Oder, entrato nel Mecklenburgo e costretto Banér a ritirarsi nella Pomerania di dietro rovinata, gli Svedesi erano affamati».

86 In the introduction to his edition of Montecuccoli's writings, Raimondo Luraghi puts forth a valuable contribution in dispelling some old myths, that is to say: Montecuccoli as a conservative tactician because of his emphasis on the pike; Montecuccoli as an alleged adept of an indecisive, delaying strategy of attrition, as opposed to the strategy of annihilation pursued by the contemporary Miklós Zrínyi. However, Luraghi seems to be rather uninterested in a thorough analysis of Montecuccoli's strategic thought, especially in comparison to the post-Napoleonic thinkers. His scant critique of the theoretical absurdities of the strategy of annihilation, with its almost obsessive focus on decisive battle, is worth of appreciation, but it is mistakenly traced back to the *Vom Kriege*, not to its later exegetes. See: LURAGHI (ed.) *Opere*, I, pp. 86-88, 95-99.



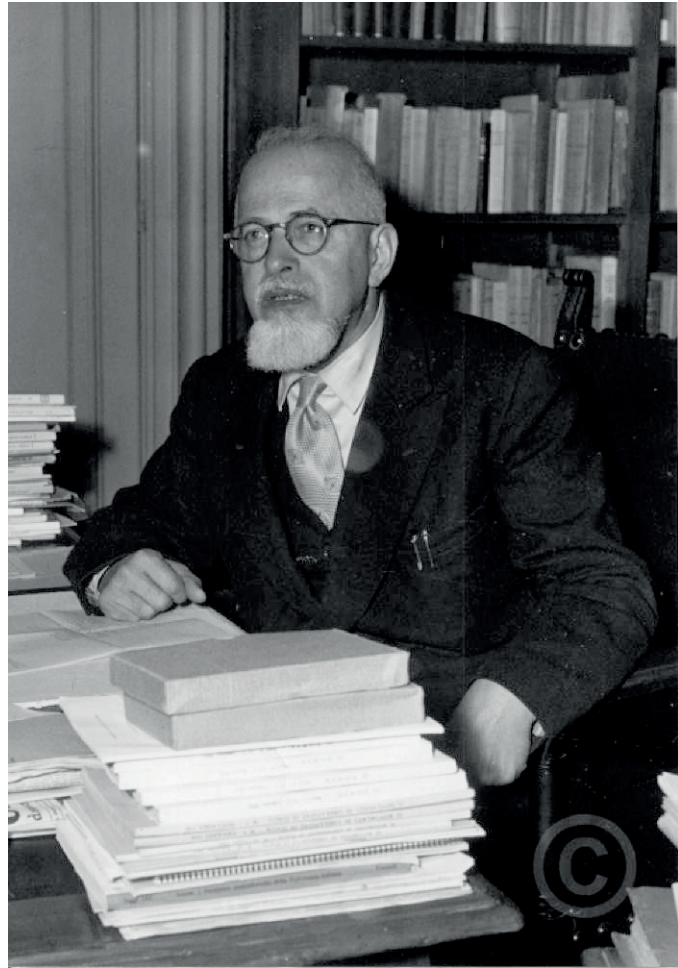
Montecuculi's Portrait, from *Besondere un geheime Kriegs-Nachrichten des Fürsten Raymundi Montecuculi*, Leipzig, 1736.

a conceptual framework applied for the first time to the interpretation of Machiavelli's somewhat contradictory statements as expressed in the *Arte della guerra*: at the core of this framework there is the general distinction between a strategy of annihilation that seeks out a decision through the field battle aimed at destroying the enemy forces; and a strategy of attrition in which battle can be sought out or avoided according to the circumstances.⁸⁷

Indeed, the underlying assumption is that the strategy of annihilation pursued through a series of resolute set-piece battles represents the highest form of strategy, a belief in whose name the often inconsistent Machiavelli is proclaimed as some kind of precursor of the Clausewitzian military thought: «in the *Arte della guerra* the strategy of annihilation is fully considered and expressed, but beside it some components which I would define second-hand, true dregs sometimes, survive and determine not just an attenuation and limitation of the concept, rather a true contradiction». Nonetheless, according to Pieri «the founder of the political science is also the upholder of the highest form of strategy: one has to come to Clausewitz, after the experiences of the Napoleonic Wars, for coming across new developments in the theory».⁸⁸ At once, three centuries of intellectual labour, ideally from Machiavelli to Clausewitz, are labelled as stagnant or regressive. Of course, Pieri finds many passages in Montecuccoli's works liable to redeem

87 PIERI, *Guerra e politica*, p. 56: «il fine di chi vuol fare la guerra è quello di poter condurre una serie d'operazioni coordinate che abbiano per risultato definitivo la battaglia campale, decisiva, annientatrice [...] chi sa all'occorrenza far fronte al nemico in campo aperto, e batterlo, rimedia agli altri errori. Qui il pensiero non è già più nel campo della vera strategia annientatrice: prima la guerra era concepita come una serie di operazioni tendenti alla battaglia campale, decisiva; ora essa è trasformata in una serie di campeggiamenti, in cui il capitano può anche dar battaglia se le circostanze lo favoriscono». It is safe to assume that, according to Pieri, as soon as a strategic theory fails to be single-mindedly focused on the battle of annihilation, attrition immediately comes into play.

88 *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59: «nell'Arte della guerra la strategia annientatrice è vista e affermata in pieno, ma accanto ad essa rimangono elementi che chiamerei di accatto, vere scorie talvolta, che segnano non un'attenuazione e limitazione di questa, ma spesso una vera contraddizione [...] il fondatore della scienza politica è pure l'assertore della più alta strategia; bisogna giungere al Clausewitz, e dopo le esperienze delle guerre napoleoniche, perché la teoria faccia nuovi progressi». Machiavelli, of course, was not a forerunner of the *Vom Kriege*: rather, a theorist generally aware that war was a manifold reality, swinging between field battles, broad manoeuvres, delaying actions, attrition brought about by scorched-earth policies and siege operations. The chief difference between Machiavelli's *Arte della guerra* and Montecuccoli's writings is that the latter could take advantage of a vastly superior field experience for expressing his thoughts in a more orderly fashion.



Portrait of Piero Pieri. Fondazione Istituto Piemontese “Antonio Gramsci”. Archivio fotografico. Partito comunista italiano. Federazione provinciale, Torino archivio.biblioteca@polodel900.it Licenza BC-NC-SA.

his military thought, and in this regard his contribution to the development of the oblique order is duly recognized and appreciated.⁸⁹

Likewise, an alleged «strategy of the first period» of the Modenese is exalted as close to a true strategy of annihilation, mostly on the basis of the many enunciations of the *Delle battaglie* on the need for the operations to be swift and aimed at compelling the enemy to accept battle in unfavourable circumstances.⁹⁰ «these

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-93.

⁹⁰ PIERI, in *Ibid.*, p. 95, acknowledges the “progressive” elements in Montecuccoli’s strategy of the first period, like the need of emulating Caesar’s swiftness, or the insistence on an

maxims, which show an uncommonly advanced strategic conception, a true coming back, or at least an attempt to come back, to the true strategy of annihilation disappeared, so to say, in the military history with Julius Caesar and revived only in recent times with Napoleon». ⁹¹ Beside these progressive components reminiscent of the best Machiavellian thought on the «guerres courtes et grandes», ⁹² however, Pieri is compelled to recognise that many enunciations must be ascribed to the strategy of attrition. This is especially true when he takes into consideration the writings of the maturity, like the *Aphorisms*, allegedly reflecting the third and final stage of his strategic conceptions: «[Montecuccoli] swings between principles which anticipate the future and really come close to the XIX-century strategy of annihilation, and maxims which partially reflect a thought still bound to the old strategy of attrition», in «a strange mix [...] of the old and the new». ⁹³

Delbrück and the Ermattungsstrategie

Actually, ascribing Montecuccoli's thought to such a strategy of attrition would not represent a particularly controversial interpretation: taking inspiration from the note written by Clausewitz in 1827, in which the existence of two distinct forms of war – i.e. war of annihilation and limited war – was suggested, ⁹⁴

almost Napoleonic conception of a ceaseless pursuit of the broken enemy, but apparently he fails to recognise that many enunciations of the *Trattato della guerra* – which should be considered an integral part of this strategy of the first period, being the first major work of Montecuccoli – go in the opposite direction: see above, notes 84 and 85.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 96: «queste massime, che mostrano una concezione strategica singolarmente progredita, un vero ritorno, o almeno una tendenza a tornare alla vera strategia annientatrice, venuta meno, potrebbe dirsi, nella storia militare, con Giulio Cesare e risorta solo in tempi recenti con Napoleone».

92 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

93 *Ibid.*, p. 103: «si oscilla ora fra principi che precorrono l'avvenire e sfiorano veramente la strategia annientatrice del secolo XIX, e massime che mostrano un pensiero in parte ancora legato alla vecchia guerra di logorio [...] Strana mescolanza nel Montecuccoli d'antico e di nuovo».

94 «War can be of two kinds, in the sense that either the objective is to overthrow the enemy – to render him politically helpless or militarily impotent, thus forcing him to sign whatever peace we please; or merely to occupy some of his frontier-districts so that we can annex them or use them for bargaining at the peace negotiations. Transitions from one type to the other will of course recur in my treatment; but the fact that the aims of the two types are quite different must be clear at all times, and their points of irreconcilability brought on», in Carl von CLAUSEWITZ, *On War. Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Pa-*

Hans Delbrück had already stated that military strategy could be divided into a *Niederwerfungsstrategie* (strategy of annihilation) and an *Ermattungsstrategie* (strategy of attrition). While the former had as «its sole aim [...] the decisive battle [...] the second type of strategy [...] was distinguished from the strategy of annihilation by the fact “that the *Niederwerfungsstrategie* has only one pole, the battle, whereas the *Ermattungsstrategie* has two poles, battle and maneuver, between which the decisions of the general move”».⁹⁵



Portrait of Hans Gottlieb Leopold Delbrück (from *The Critic*, vol. 40, 1902, p. 228). Babel, Hathitrust, Wikimedia Commons.

On the basis of what already pointed out about Montecuccoli's writings – equally propounding battle and attrition according to the circumstances – it is quite apparent that his military thought falls within the scope of the *Ermattungsstrategie*.

The point is, nowhere in Delbrück's writings there is the suggestion that such a differentiation between a strategy of annihilation and one of attrition is actually a qualitative distinction between a superior and an inferior form of war.⁹⁶ The decision whether to opt for one or the other is to be dictated by the political aims and the military means of that specific war. As for Pieri, on the contrary, the

ret, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 69.

95 Gordon A. CRAIG, “Delbrück: The Military Historian”, in Peter PARET (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy. From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1986, p. 341.

96 *Ibid.*, p. 342: «The second form of strategy is neither a mere variation of the first nor an inferior form. In certain periods of history, because of political factors or the smallness of armies, it has been the only form of strategy that could be employed».

original Delbrück's framework is revived by understanding such a broad distinction between annihilation and attrition as an opposition between, respectively, a progressive and a regressive form of war. This misunderstanding implies that the historical and intellectual milieu from which this interpretive framework arose was unclear to Pieri. Actually, far from being intended as an inferior form of war, the *Ermattungsstrategie* was devised by Delbrück first and foremost as a strategic alternative to what he perceived as a dogmatical and exclusive focus on the decisive battle typical of the *Niederwerfungsstrategie* pursued by the contemporary German General Staff.⁹⁷

Symptomatically, the battleground which saw Delbrück pitched against the historians of the General Staff in the so called *Strategiestreit* was represented by his markedly revisionist rereading of the campaigns of Frederick the Great: a captain whose deeds were held to be an embodiment of the strategy of annihilation by the received wisdom of the day.⁹⁸ Delbrück could not accept the view of Frederick as a «forerunner of Napoleon» and, in turn, of the Clausewitzian thought. What is more, he grew convinced, as already touched upon, that «towards the end of his life, Clausewitz had realised that by focusing purely on *Niederwerfungsstrategie*, he was excluding the experiences of earlier warfare from his supposedly universal theory of war».⁹⁹ Regrettably, I feel compelled to note that such a *Niederwerfungsstrategie*, in itself a theoretical extremization of the lessons inferred from the Napoleonic Wars, still represents a hindrance to the full understanding of the military theorists of an earlier age.

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97 *Ibid.*, pp. 344-345.

98 Robert T. FOLEY, *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun. Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition, 1870-1916*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 39-40, 42-43.

99 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

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