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Fascicolo 15. Giugno 2023
Storia Militare Moderna

a cura di
VIRGILIO ILARI



Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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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).

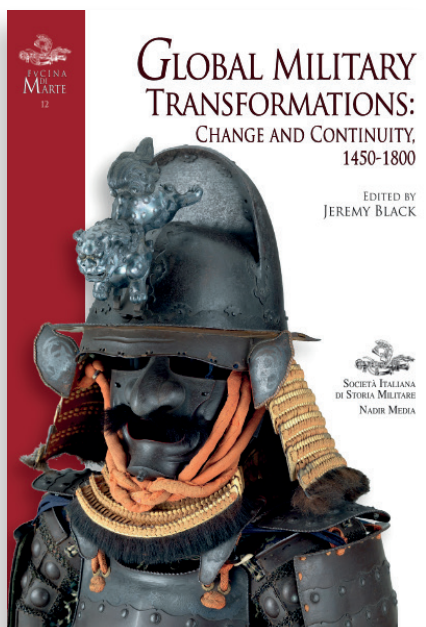
Il celebre motto fu apposto sulle canne delle artiglierie francesi fuse dal 1650 al 1793, e anche su parte delle coeve artiglierie sabaude. La variante *ultima ratio regis* (estrema ragione del re) fu usata a partire dal 1742 sulle artiglierie prussiane e successivamente anche sui cannoni spagnoli, mentre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

JEREMY BLACK (ED.)

*Global Military Transformations:
Change and Continuity, 1450-1800*

Collana *Vicina di Marte*, No. 12

Roma, Società Italiana di Storia Militare–Nadir Media, 2023, pp. 533



Since the publication of the first Italian translation of Geoffrey Parker’s seminal rephrasing of the Military Revolution thesis,¹ Italy has been inclined to enthusiastically – albeit, rather uncritically – embrace such a new interpretive paradigm. However, serious attempts to verify the soundness of the Military Revolution through a verification of its main tenets vis-à-vis the Italian experience – especially during the highly transformative period of the Italian Wars – are still wanting, perhaps reflecting the general disinclination of the Ital-

¹ Geoffrey PARKER, *La rivoluzione militare. Le innovazioni militari e il sorgere dell’occidente*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1990.

ian academia toward military history: an aversion whose reasons – tracing back not just to the scant critique of the so-called *histoire bataille* brought about by the Annales School, but also to the traumatic experience embodied by the kind of militaristic ethos kindled by Fascism – Gregory Hanlon briefly touched upon.² Such a state of affairs is further compounded by the failure in recognising and incorporating those voices critical of the glaring shortcomings of the thesis firstly advanced by Michael Roberts and reworked by Parker: a negligence also implying a dearth of translations of significant foreign publications. Prominent among the latter is Jeremy Black's *A Military Revolution?*, up to now the most convincing and thorough analysis of the Military Revolution paradigm and its inconsistencies.³ Black prefers to interpret the military changes and the interrelated socio-political transformations of the period as articulated in three periods: a first period between the late-fifteenth and the early-sixteenth century in which the wide variety of firearms introduced triggered an equally wide array of social and political adaptations, though still within a traditional political frame; a second period, roughly between 1560 and 1660, marked by widespread civil strife overcome by means of a militarisation of the society and the achievement of a post-confessional ideological cohesion; a third and final period, after 1660, identified by Black as the military revolution pure and proper, with the «desperate expedients» of the past giving way to the large standing armies and the massed firepower peculiar of the modern states.⁴

Therefore, a collection of essays selected and edited by Jeremy Black for the Società Italiana di Storia Militare is most welcome, filling many of the aforementioned gaps; and it is worth noting that, though deliberately renouncing to enforce any kind of common template (as declared by the editor himself)⁵ upon the authors, most of the essays collected fit in the interpretive framework originally proposed by Black. For instance, Christopher Storrs, tackling Spain as

2 Gregory HANLON, *The Hero of Italy. Odoardo Farnese, Duke of Parma. His Soldiers, and his Subjects in the Thirty Years' War*, Oxford, Oxford U. P., 2014, pp. 1-3. ID., *Italy 1636. Cemetery of Armies*, Oxford, Oxford U. P., 2016, p. 6.

3 Jeremy BLACK, *A Military Revolution? Military Change and European Society, 1550-1800*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1991.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 4-6, 20-27, 33, 67-71.

5 Jeremy BLACK (ed.), *Global Military Transformations: Change and Continuity, 1450-1800*, Roma, Società Italiana di Storia Militare, Nadir Media, 2023, p. 11.

one of the main touchstones of the adequacy of the Military Revolution thesis as the first European global power, argues that despite the recent rephrasing of the late-Habsburg period in terms of continuity and resilience instead of sheer decline, the patterns of «Habsburg and Bourbon Spain did differ in many important respects», thus lending credence to Black's original idea of identifying a true Military Revolution in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.⁶ As for France, Brian Sandberg echoes James B. Wood in interpreting the period of civil strife represented by the French Wars of Religion as a phenomenon whose outcome was dictated «by the combination of religious rebellion and an incomplete Military Revolution».⁷ Mentioning the fundamental contribution of David Parrott, focused on the lingering inadequacies of the French bureaucracy during the Thirty Years War and the inability of properly bolstering Richelieu's war efforts,⁸ Sandberg agrees with John A. Lynn⁹ in identifying «the development of permanent military forces as a key component of the state-commission army style»,¹⁰ thus postponing the most momentous French military transformations to the second half of the seventeenth century, under the reign of Louis XIV. Though a specific chapter on the Dutch case is lacking, we feel compelled to stress that such conclusions are corroborated by the most recent acquisitions of the Dutch historiography: for instance, Olaf van Nimwegen downplays the seminal importance of the reforms of Maurice of Nassau – at the core of the Military Revolution in its original formulation proposed by Roberts – by stressing that the real structural reforms of its military organisation were forced upon the Dutch Republic by the French aggression from 1667 onwards.¹¹ Adopting a slightly different perspective, Mark Charles Fissel identifies «in the crucible of the civil war» – thus echoing the second phase of Black's interpretive framework – one of the three

6 Christopher STORRS, "Spain and the Military Revolution", in BLACK (ed.), *Military Transformations*, p. 176.

7 Brian SANDBERG, "Early Modern France and the Military Revolution", in BLACK (ed.), *Military Transformations*, p. 127.

8 David PARROTT, *Richelieu's Army. War, Government and Society in France, 1624-1642*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

9 John A. LYNN, "The Evolution of Army Style in the Modern West, 800-2000", in *The International History Review*, vol. 18, No. 3 (Aug., 1996), pp. 505-545.

10 SANDBERG, "Early Modern France", pp. 149-150.

11 Olaf van NIMWEGEN, *The Dutch Army and the Military Revolutions, 1588-1688*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2010, pp. 14-17.

concurrent factors of the bursts of rapid change determining the British military revolutions.¹² This model is substantially adopted by Vladimir Shirogorov, who considers the aforementioned Black's cycle as suiting the case represented by Eastern Europe, where «the stage of the Renaissance military changes was closed by civil war» both in Poland-Lithuania and in Muscovy.¹³ Lastly, the chapter dedicated to Italy and authored by Marco Mostarda and Virgilio Ilari stands out as a bet on the possibility of succinctly describing the military history of the peninsula between the XVI and XVIII centuries in evolutive – rather than revolutionary – terms, without taking into account the paradigm of the Military Revolution at all: this is especially true for the Italian Wars, interpreted as the slow and often contradictory blending of a wide array of technical changes and different military traditions up until the final emergence, in the late 1520s, of a Combined Arms Warfare at the base of the pike and shot tactics of the subsequent XVII century.¹⁴

Unlike the original thesis brought about by Roberts, according to Parker's reworking of the Military Revolution the attainment of naval dominance by the European powers was fundamental in explaining the so-called rise of the West. Alan James points out the traditional diffidence of naval historians toward both the concepts of Military Revolution and Fiscal-Military State: due consideration is given to the contributions of N. A. M. Rodger, especially regarding the concept of Fiscal-Naval State as able to explain British exceptionalism, elucidate the pattern of the European bid for naval dominance and, at the same time, «displace the Military Revolution altogether».¹⁵ In this regard, the Portuguese experience illustrated by Helder Carvalhal, André Murteira and Roger Lee de Jesus is of exceptional relevance because it provides a tangible example (not a theoretical abstraction) of a precocious naval expansion that failed to be conducive to the creation of a modern Fiscal-Military State along the lines of the British and the Dutch examples.¹⁶ As a theory aimed at explaining (perhaps in too teleological terms) the rise

12 Mark Charles FISSEL, "Military Revolutions in Ireland and the British Isles, 1450-1800", in BLACK (ed.) *Military Transformations*, p. 72.

13 Vladimir SHIROGOROV, "Quo Vadis? The Military Revolution in Eastern Europe", in BLACK (ed.), *Military Transformations*, pp. 289-290.

14 Marco MOSTARDA, Virgilio ILARI, "Exploring the Italian Military Paradox", in BLACK (ed.), *Military Transformations*, pp. 237-240.

15 Alan JAMES, "Moving Beyond the Military Revolution at Sea", in BLACK (ed.), *Military Transformations*, pp. 37-38.

16 Helder CARVALHAL, André MURTEIRA, Roger Lee DE JESUS, "Moving Beyond the MR: The

of the West, the Military Revolution also became an important comparative tool at the service of Global History: therefore, its adequacy must be evaluated vis-à-vis historical case studies outside of European boundaries. Kenneth M. Swope reminds us that the Ming Empire qualifies for being considered «the world's first gunpowder empire» and that, contrary to previous assumptions about the birth of volley fire with the Dutch reforms of Maurice of Nassau, Chinese «musketees were trained in countermarching and practiced volley fire, though previous Western scholars largely ignored these facts due to ignorance of Qi [Jiguang]'s manuals». ¹⁷ Such an observation is particularly relevant in view of the forthcoming publication of the third and thoroughly revised edition of Parker's *Military Revolution* in which, as anticipated by the author, the birth of the volley fire in Europe with the Dutch countermarch is a conviction about to be forcefully reasserted. ¹⁸ In dealing with the Ottoman Empire, instead, Gábor Ágoston proves to be sensibly unwilling to set his analysis within the traditional frame provided by the Military Revolution: for instance, he stresses that the generally acknowledged Ottoman participation in artillery revolution places «undue emphasis on weapons and military technology overstating the role that firearms played in the emergence and evolution of the Ottoman polity», and that the continuing success met by the Ottoman traditional siege tactics based on mining and sapping, especially against state-of-the-art fortifications, «warns against the fetishisation of modern siege techniques». ¹⁹

Given the vague terms and everchanging nature of the Military Revolution, it is difficult to say if these contributions ever manage to steer the debate toward a stable and methodologically rigorous reformulation of the thesis, but at least they will provide many useful correctives to old misconceptions. Indeed, it is still a long way to achieve some kind of consensus even on the basic terms of the debate. For instance, the socio-political crisis of the XVII century – inspiring

Portuguese Case”, in BLACK (ed.), *Military Transformations*, p. 200.

17 Kenneth M. SWOPE, “Revolution or Evolution? The Late Imperial Chinese Military, ca. 1400-1800”, in BLACK (ed.), *Military Transformations*, pp. 455, 472.

18 Geoffrey PARKER, “Is the Military Revolution Dead Yet?”, in Giampiero BRUNELLI, (cur.), *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica*, n. 2/2022, *La rivoluzione militare dell'età moderna*, Roma, Sapienza Università Editrice, 2022, p. 224

19 Gábor ÁGOSTON, *Ottoman Warfare, 1450-1700: Reflections on Recent Research*, in BLACK (ed.), *Military Transformations*, pp. 413, 423-424.

Black's second phase of civil strife in his cycle of military transformations – has always been interpreted as an attempted pushback both of the aristocracy and the populace against the centralisation efforts of the impending Fiscal-Military State, threatening at the same time a curtailing of the privileges enjoyed by the elites and an increase of the tax burden weighing on peasants. However, with his recent *Global Crisis*, Geoffrey Parker proved able to rephrase once again the discussion on remarkably new basis, intertwining global political instability and civil strife with climate change, thus rejecting the notion of a general crisis of the XVII century as a function of the early modern state-building processes.²⁰ The quicksands of the Military Revolution are not about to give way to a solid bedrock anytime soon.

COMESTOR

²⁰ Geoffrey PARKER, *Global Crisis. War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century*, New Haven and London, Yale U. P., 2013.



Storia Militare Moderna

Articoli / Articles

- Nuove fonti veneziane sulla battaglia di Mohács
di MÁRTON SZOVÁK
- Cultural and Knowledge Exchange between Dubrovnik and Livorno at the Time of Ferdinando I de' Medici,
by MIRELA ALTIC
- Dall'armata a cavallo all'arma di cavalleria. Trasformazione militare e mutamento sociale attraverso la trattatistica italiana della prima età moderna,
di LUCA DOMIZIO
- Vittorioso ad Alessandretta? L'«impresa navale» di Kenelm Digby fra autopromozione, miti nazionali e frammenti di realtà,
di VIVIANA CASTELLI
- Due dispacci cifrati al veleno nella guerra di Candia,
di PAOLO BONA VOGLIA
- Breitenfeld and Montecuccoli. How to learn from a battle,
by MARCO MOSTARDA
- Guerre de course dans l'Empire des Habsbourg d'Espagne (1621-1697). Corsaires flamands, italiens, majorquins, basques et autres. Essai de synthèse,
par ROBERTO BARAZZUTTI
- La mobilitazione dei cittadini di Pavia in occasione dell'assedio del 1655,
di FABIO ROMANONI
- «Con questo candido, et ordinario stile dà soldato». *Il Diario dell'Assedio di Valenza* dell'ingegnere Gaspare Beretta,
di MARCO GIUSEPPE LONGONI
- Informazioni e spie negli stati sabaudi tra Seicento e Settecento: dinamiche, studi e prospettive di ricerca,
di FRANCESCO BIASI
- L'Ordine di Malta nella Seconda guerra di Morea attraverso i diari di viaggio del cavaliere fra' Afranio Petrucci, maggiore dei vascelli (1715-1717),
di MAURO DIFRANCESCO
- La battaglia di Petrovaradino. 1716,
di ADRIANO PAPO e GIZELLA NEMETH
 - «Una nazione assai ardata et azzardosa». Le forze navali inglesi nel bacino alto tirrenico al tempo della guerra di Successione austriaca,
di SAMUELE VIRGA
- Uomini che scrivono e parlano come operano, e come sentono. Eloquenza politica e retorica militare nelle riflessioni di Francesco Algarotti,
di DENISE ARICÒ
- People at arms and soldiers in Lefkada during the Septinsular Republic (1801-07),
by SEVASTI LAZARI
- La difficile mise sur pied des Tirailleurs du Pô,
par BRUNO PAUVERT
- Le gendarmerie dei principati di Lucca e Piombino e di Benevento e Pontecorvo,
di PIERO CROCIANI

Prospettive. • Nelson and the Naval Crisis of 1790s, by JEREMY BLACK

Recensioni / Reviews

- BÉATRICE HEUSER, *War A Genealogy of Western Ideas and Practices*
(by LUCA DOMIZIO)
- JEREMY BLACK (ed.), *Global Military Transformations: Change and Continuity, 1450-1800*
(di COMESTOR)
- MARK FISSEL (Ed.), *The Military Revolution and Revolutions in Military Affairs*
(di FEDERICO MORO)
- ALEXANDER QUERENGÄSSER, *Before the Military Revolution. European Warfare and the Rise of the Early Modern State 1300-1490*
(by MARK CHARLES FISSEL)
 - GIAMPIERO BRUNELLI (cur.), Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica, 2/2022. Sezione monografica: *La rivoluzione militare dell'età moderna*
(di MARCO MOSTARDA)
- SVANTE NORRHEM & ERIC THOMSON, *Subsidies, Diplomacy, and State Formation in Europe, 1494-1789. Economies of Allegiance*
(di STEFANO CATTELAN)
- GHEORGIOS THEOTOKIS and Aysel YILDIZ, *A Military History of the Mediterranean Sea*
(by EIRINI VRETTOU)
- ALEXANDRE JOUBELIN, *Par le fer et par le feu. Combattre dans l'Atlantique (XVIe-XVIIe siècles)*
(di STEFANO CATTELAN; par ROBERTO BARAZZUTTI)
- FRANCESCO FRASCA, *Il sorgere delle potenze atlantiche. Mercantilismo e guerra*
(di ANTHONY CISFARINO)
 - ANTONIO VIOLANTE, *Giovanni Caboto. El gran ammirante verso il sogno del Catai*
(di COMESTOR)
- OLIVIER CHALINE, *Apprendre la mer. Au temps de la voile en France XVIIe-XVIIIe*
(par ROBERTO BARAZZUTTI)
 - ALESSANDRO METLICA ed ENRICO ZUCCHI (cur.), *La res publica di Galeazzo Gualdo Priorato (1606-1678)*
(di CHIARA SILVAGNI)
 - MARIA DEL PILAR MESA CORONADO, *Fuerzas Terrestres del Reino de Sicilia 1665-1700*
(by CHRISTOPHER STORRS)
- BRUNO MUGNAI, *Armies of the Italian States 1660-1690*
(di COMESTOR)
 - CARLA BENOCCHI, *L'ultima Lega Santa 1683-1691. Dalla liberazione di Vienna alla Transilvania e alla riconquista cristiana della Morea e dei Dardanelli nel Diario romano di Carlo Cartari*
(di ANTHONY CISFARINO)
- STEFANO SANTAGATA, *I Montecuccoli. I Successioni feudali e patrimoniali*
(di PAOLO CARRARO)
- FABIO FIORENTIN, *Luzzara 1702. La battaglia di Ferragosto*
(di FRANCESCO BIASI)
 - RODOLFO TERRAGNO, *Maitland & San Martín - Cesáreo Jarabo Jordán, El fin del imperio de España en América. El imperio inglés contra el español*
(por ISRAEL VIANA)
- JESÚS CHAPELA REY, *Medallas y órdenes de las guerras napoleónicas y revolucionarias 1792-1815*
(by JONATHAN IACOBO BAR SHUALI)
- PAOLO PALUMBO, *Da Venaria a Saumur. Gli ussari piemontesi e il 26° Cacciatori a cavallo*
(di VIRGILIO ILARI)
- AAVV, *La cartografia italiana in età napoleonica (1796-1815). Mappe atlanti e manuali per il disegno del territorio*
(di SIMONETTA CONTI)
- LUCA GANDINI, *Rivoli e il suo duca. André Masséna*
(di COMESTOR)
- LUCA GANDINI, *Rivoli Storia di un Monumento*
(di COMESTOR)