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N. 4
2023

Fascicolo 15. Giugno 2023
Storia Militare Moderna

a cura di
VIRGLIO ILARI



Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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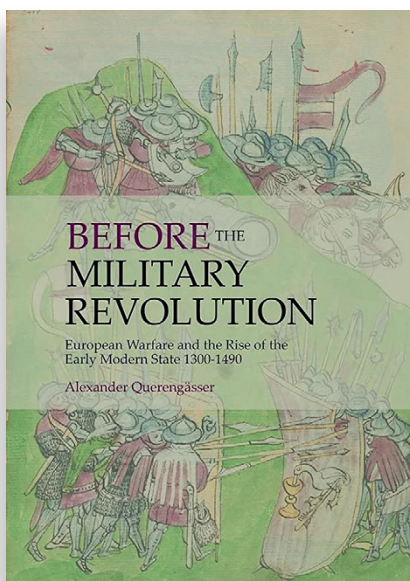
Ultima Ratio Regum (Estrema ragione dei Re) iscrizione su un cannone all'ingresso del Museo di Storia Militare di Budapest. Foto O. Mustafiri, CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication (Wikipedia commons).

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.

ALEXANDER QUERENGÄSSER

Before the Military Revolution
European Warfare and the Rise
of the Early Modern State 1300-1490

Oxbow Books, Oxford and Philadelphia, 2021. ISBN 978-1-78925-669-7



The classic military revolution formula of 1956 was a quadripartite configuration of weaponry, tactics, strategy, and socio-economic institutionalization. Alexander Querengässer explores the origins of that last element, particularly regarding state formation. He analyzes the nineteen decades preceding the efflorescence of the traditional “gunpowder” military revolution, the latter very loosely demarcated by the period from 1494 to 1660. Foremost under consideration is the fiscalization of the conduct of hostilities. To quote the author directly, transformation of the “feudal levy system to mer-

cenary armies” constituted a “social-military revolution” (p 187). “The concept of this book was to show that the Military Revolution model - if anything – fits best to the late medieval shift from feudal levy bans to mercenary armies, which went hand in hand with a shift from a feudal system to the modern administrative state” (p 205) Manifestations of early capitalism and mercenarism lie at the heart of Querengässer’s identification of preconditions that fostered the early-modern military revolution. The cash nexus differentiated feudal levies and hosts from the monetarily based service of mercenaries, a distinction which affected European states of all sizes and influenced how they combatted each other. Admittedly, we ascend a slippery slope. One must qualify the author’s binary thesis with the acknowledgement that the varieties of feudal military service were vast in number. For example, in Ireland in the late 1290s, legal fictions and craftily constructed contracts put brass in pocket among English knights while they handsomely postured as feudal minions serving their sovereign. However, Querengässer does not allow his argument to be sandbagged by what he would likely regard as anomalies. Transitions from sporadically mobilized forces from far corners of the realm to semi-permanent standing forces may be a better binary distinction. Standing forces, however they were paid, required more centralized funding and regularized training. Professionalization (because of fiscalization) made soldiers more adept with their weapons, and tactically proficient. The evolution of standing forces (regardless of service contract) incorporates the utilization of medieval and early modern militias, a form of military organization peripheral to Querengässer’s fundamental thesis. Similarly, military entrepreneurship (wherein the contracting of a paid soldiery was bureaucratized and coordinated by individuals who were neither feudal lords nor official servants of the state) saw systems of recruitment evolve from the late medieval period and then blossom in the seventeenth century. Fiscalization inculcated longevity and professionalism that was exploited operationally. Querengässer asserts that a “newly emerging professional class” not only established a unique labor market but amassed a reservoir of collective knowledge and operational expertise (p 175). One is reminded of the scholarship of John Casparis, particularly his “The Swiss Mercenary System, Labor Emigration from the semi-periphery” [*Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, vol. 5, no. 4 (Spring 1982), pp 593-642, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40240921>; see also Kelly DeVries, “Medieval Mercenaries: Methodology, Definitions, and Problems” in John France, ed. *Mercenaries and Paid Men. The Mercenary Iden-*



[*Landesknechtes*, depicted in a sixteenth century German woodcut. Alexander Querengässer's book illumines the medieval origins of early modern European mercenarism. Image attribution: reviewer's collection].

tity in the Middle Ages (Brill, Leiden 2008) pp 43-60]. Casparis contextualizes mercenary enlistments of the Swiss from 1450 as components within a “larger evolving capitalist world economy” (p 593). The volatile demographics of the 1300s became the crucible from which the early modern military revolution would ultimately be formed. For example, the calamities of plague, coupled with the endemic afflictions of war, fomented labor emigration while simultaneously creating commercial demand for live bodies because of heightened mortality rates wrought by disease or as the consequent casualties of violent conflict.

A model parallel to that proposed by Querengässer already exists for the role of gunpowder in military revolution. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are recognized (by early modernists as well as medievalists) as the seminal era for

firearms and artillery. The author claims that the socio-economic and institutional genesis of the early modern military revolution likewise can trace its origins to this medieval era. The tome advocates extension of broad chronological boundaries and widening of the European geographic sphere for comparative purposes. Complex and latent socio-economic phenomena, played out over decades, must be understood before drawing conclusions about significant transformations of warfare. Querengässer deciphers subtle changes in European society that preceded the classic Robertsian Military Revolution of the 1500s, rather than succumbing (as many of us do) to spotlighting and then magnifying the weapons-related components of the gunpowder age revolution. This reviewer would take issue with Querengässer regarding the slow ascendancy of handheld firearms (although my objection supports rather than contradicts Querengässer's conclusions). The author subscribes to the popularized view that that the proliferation of the gun was due in part to its comparative ease of use compared against medieval weaponry already long in use (p 6). That conjecture remains suspect. Firearms technology, even into the industrial era, is complex. Maintenance, loading, aiming, and firing demanded dexterity and conceptual knowledge of sequencing of meticulous tasks. If one posits the technical expertise required of handling guns under fire, then mercenaries would have had an advantage over militia and feudal levies that trained only periodically.

Gunpowder made demands of the soldiers who used it. Naturally, each state possessed idiosyncrasies that complicated how arquebusiers and artillerymen were sustained and managed. Recruitment and service contracts for such warriors could not replicate the mobilizations of the early Middle Ages. Such bureaucratic considerations are sometimes drowned out by the concussions of gunpowder weapons themselves. It is indeed tempting to exaggerate the impact of artillery, say from 1490 to 1520, construing that category of weaponry as more seismic and abrupt in its practical consequences than perhaps historical fact would admit, an impression confirmed implicitly by contemporaries who saw continuity as opposed to those (generally historians) who adduce rapid change. The "bottom line" here is that although gunpowder changed warfare more profoundly than any other technological innovation the socio-economic context determined its application. The author attributes to institutions, shaped by economic agency, as making possible the successful utilization of gunpowder technology. Therefore, the book takes its place in the hefty historiography on the subject of war and the state. In

the process, Querengässer draws from diverse schools of historical interpretation. State formation is highly relevant in both Marxian and Whig interpretations, and that common denominator provides a foundation for Querengässer. The attribution of causation to economics and institutional evolution makes an interpretation incorporating those schools of thought by definition determinist, yet this volume appears to surmount the determinist trap. Querengässer's reconciliation, or perhaps more accurately alloy-like synthesis, of Marxian and Whig perspectives strengthen his assertions regarding state formation, taxation, and the labor market. This hedging of bets about causation, while methodologically sound, confounds simple historiographical categorization because of its eclecticism- again, somewhat Marxian due to its views upon the causal role of economics; somewhat Whiggish due to his emphasis upon progressive development of representative assemblies as vehicles for taxation. Of course, there is more to war-making than amassing capital via revenue-raising. Fiscalization also created a reservoir of knowledge and a market for literature about warfare.

The book closes out with a chapter on "A Revolution of Knowledge", which falls under the broader heading of a medieval "Intellectual Revolution". For Querengässer the latter phenomenon is relevant because within this new literary culture, military books and pamphlets appeared that made public the expertise that came with mercenary armies; and, we might conclude, greater operational efficiency resulted. The medieval "Infantry Revolution" is addressed, with the role of leadership in armies of the Middle Ages factored in as well. Strategic thinking, a component of strategic culture, receives treatment. All in all, this is a thoughtful, balanced, and original work of scholarship. Querengässer has done much to further a "preconditions of military revolution" literature. He strengthens the linkages between medieval studies and a sometimes admittedly myopic corpus of early modern European historiography. The book is also suggestive of questions that deserve consideration. How was what was true of mercenarism during 1300 to 1490 became strikingly different in the military revolution era of 1490-1525? Clearly, mercenary armies were better adapted to operational maneuvers, and adaptation not as prevalent (or possible?) within the feudal levies as described by the author. Recruiting systems, leadership, strategic thinking, and geopolitics were better managed by those commanding standing armies, arguably. The Swiss cantons were far from "feudal," yet they epitomized military revolution-era mercenarism. By the 1600s, considering states' arrangements with

the various incarnations of military entrepreneurship (for which a substantial scholarship is in print), how do these later periods dovetail with Querengässer's theses? What of specific organizational "mutations" and battlefield behavior? If the mode and form of payments were salient factors, is there archival evidence that could bridge theory to blood-stained reality? Again, consider our English knights serving in Ireland in 1296 (above). Finally, given Querengässer's traversing of the "state formation road", then the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) might be considered as a useful paradigmatic device, as Lee L. Brice has done for the ancient world. The author could apply the RMA concept to his subject because the developments he describes are endogenous innovations in the institutional sustenance of warfare. Querengässer intersperses, within his narrative paragraphs, clues to such categories of inquiry herein mentioned.

Querengässer's fertile observations, however, are not as accessible as they deserve, due to the absence of an index. However, indexes add to production costs, and apparently for that reason no index exists to guide the reader to larger themes and to ferret out specifics, which is unfortunate. In terms of production, Oxbow's binding, glossy paper, and cover design are impressive. In conclusion, Alexander Querengässer is to be congratulated for clarifying ably the origins of the classic military revolution of early-modern Europe.

MARK CHARLES FISSEL



Storia Militare Moderna

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