Eighteenth-Century Warfare Reconsidered
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Eighteenth-century military capabilities and warfare are generally seen as limited. David Chandler argued that there was "a "crisis of strategy" in the late seventeenth and for much of the eighteenth centuries ... these wars were undoubtedly "limited" in a very real sense – namely in the restricted ability of armed forces to carry out the grand strategic or political aims ordered by their rulers and governments. Schemes of vast manoeuvre and rapid decision were beyond their scope. Campaigns and even wars were therefore largely controlled by logistical factors'. Most recently, the lengthiest narrative treatment of the subject, that by Russell Weigley, concludes, 'as a positive instrument of policy, as a weapon with which to win positive gains for the national interest at a cost not disproportionate to the gains, war in the age of battles was consistently a disappointment and a failure'. Bernhard Kroener has written of military operations degenerating into operettas.1

Weigley, however, offers a variation to the orthodoxy by extending it to include the Napoleonic period: 'Year after year, in seemingly climatic battle after battle, Napoleon pushed his enemies down – but they refused to stay down. Altogether, then, the Napoleonic Wars resembled the Thirty Years War in their prolonged indecision'.

This variation is interesting, because the emphasis on the indecisiveness of ancien régime warfare is commonly matched by a stress on the greater decisiveness and indeed determination of its Revolutionary and Napoleonic successor. Scholars keen to stress the role of change do so generally by emphasizing the stability and conservatism of earlier practices. Thus, a concentration on change in the post-Napoleonic period will follow Weigley, while the customary emphasis on the new warfare of the


2 Weigley, Age of Battles, p. 538.
1790s, the 'citizenry under arms' of the French Revolution, will generally adopt a negative, not to say pejorative, approach towards ancien régime warfare. The ability of Revolutionary and Napoleonic France to defeat its enemies, most obviously Prussia in 1806, encourages this analysis. Thus, whatever the focus on change, eighteenth-century warfare is commonly viewed as limited and ineffective. B.K. Király argued that 'Wars waged by these armies had to be, and were, limited in goals, scope, and final effects. These wars were, in fact, the only kind compatible with the balance of power, the prevailing system of international relations', while Charles Ingrao wrote that 'in its limited military operations and diplomatic objectives, the War of the Polish Succession is the archetypal eighteenth-century conflict'.

This approach can be queried; indeed, it has to be in order to understand both the warfare of the period and its role in international relations. This debate will consider first the general position, then, more specifically, that on the eve of the French Revolutionary Wars, before concluding by discussing the concept of decisiveness. It is necessary at the outset to note the dangers of present-mindedness. Modern concepts of decisiveness owe much to the achievement of unconditional victory in the Second World War, but it is necessary to understand the eighteenth century in its own terms. All too often the present-minded approach of subsequent historians has affected the interpretation of eighteenth-century warfare. Thus, the long, and ultimately rather self-defeating debate on Frederick II's strategy centring on the question of whether Frederick survived the Seven Years' War by waging decisive war or a war of attrition, annihilation or attrition, in part reflected the German preoccupation with their defeat in the First World War, although the debate had begun before 1914.

Aside from the dangers of present-mindedness, it is also clear that the concept of decisiveness can be handled in a number of different ways. The most relevant distinctions are between tactical and strategic considerations and between the defensive and the offensive. A decisive battle in a tactical sense can achieve a defensive aim, but there is a contrast between that and a tactically offensive battle fought as part of a strategic offensive. Victory could be so hard-won that the strategic goals of the defeated side were obtained, as at Steenkirk in 1692: 'although the
outcome of this bitter struggle is normally represented as a defeat (for William withdrew from the field) it really amounts to a strategic victory, for he gave the French such a mauling that they abandoned plans for attacking Liège. A successful defensive battle could lead to a strategic offensive. Thus, Peter the Great's victory over Charles XII of Sweden at Poltava (1709) was part of a defensive Russian strategy, and Frederick II (the Great) of Prussia was wont to quote it as an example of the danger of strategic overextension.

Ultimately, however, the problem is cultural. It is difficult for many to accept that warfare was 'for real' in a world in which artifice, convention and style played such a major role; and this is particularly the case because it has been contrasted so often with the apparently more vital, clear-cut and successful warfare of the 'Age of Revolution', more particularly the forces and ideologies of the American and French Revolutions. In artistic terms, the formality of linear formations and conventions of warfare can be seen as 'baroque' warfare, and essentially limited goals and methods behind the exuberant show as the 'rococo', both being displaced by 'neoclassical' rigour and 'Romantic' enthusiasm; in cultural terms there is a tendency to underrate the determination and ability of aristocratic societies.

Such views are rarely expressed clearly, but are no less influential for that. They are misleading, however, in that they mistake style for substance. Furthermore, in adopting a teleological approach – to which military history with its stress on technological development is all too prone – it is all too easy to adopt a critical attitude towards eighteenth-century warfare, wrongly viewing it as inflexible, conservative, limited, inconsequential and thus indecisive in every sense. This is inaccurate, but it is the current orthodoxy. Part of the problem is the extent to which work on pre-Revolutionary eighteenth-century warfare is neglected in favour of study of adjacent periods, so that past orthodoxies and standard clichés and episodes (for example, the exchange at Fontenoy (1745) over whether the British or French should fire first) are endlessly repeated. Those considering warfare in adjacent periods or over the long term are particularly susceptible to this weakness. Most of the familiar accounts of early-modern warfare treat the eighteenth century as a prologue to the 'real' Clausewitzian struggles of the next 200 years; a misleading approach. Instead of continuing to debate the question of 'revolution', historians might address the process of evolution; not in the usual sense of 'long duration', but as a more dynamic process, with a fast pace.

In addition, there has been a widespread failure to consult the political and diplomatic documentation of the period; even though such sources are crucial to the issue of decisiveness, as it is necessary to consider the...
intentions of the rulers and ministers of the period and their sense of the capabilities of other powers. In terms of intention, it is clear from an examination of such sources that decisive results were sought. It is, however, possible to approach the question by stressing that, whatever the intentions, the reality was of a military system unable to deliver decisive verdicts.

Some contemporary observers did comment on the limited nature of warfare. Thus, a letter from Oppenheim of 19 August 1735 'from the banks of the Rhine, and in sight of two formidable armies', noted 'I write it with as much tranquillity as you will read it in your garden, or by the side of the Thames. This campaign has hitherto been as harmless as a campaign can be'. It was particularly common to complain about the lack of action on the part of allies. Philip Yorke MP, finding the Austrians useless in 1747, noted 'they now send a tolerable corps into the field and act with it as the mercenary leaders of bands in Italy of whom Machiavel speaks used to do; i.e. They save their men, that they may sell them to us another year'. Captain James Horsbrugh, Adjutant-General in Gibraltar, then besieged by Spain, wrote in his diary on 22 January 1782, 'Through the day there was little firing on either side, but after nightfall the enemy being distinctly heard at work much about the same place as the preceding night, we on that account increased our fire which the Enemy returned in salvos from six to ten guns at a time, and followed this mode till after midnight, but without doing us any injury'.

Rulers, ministers and generals did not wish to lose trained troops on campaign or in conflict. Thus, in 1711 John, 2nd Duke of Argyll, Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in Spain during the War of the Spanish Succession, wrote to Major-General Thomas Whetham, 'I am sure if any misfortune should happen that it would be impossible for to get our troops recruited against next year', and later,

if we are not successful in a general attempt, this late great advantage is thrown away and we are undone and should we succeed unless the affair chances to be a battle of Ramillies or Blenheim in short that they are entirely routed I do not know if it will prove greatly to our advantage, if the enemy gives such an opportunity as that you may fall upon them with an indisputable advantage, and will be well to do it, but my humble thoughts are to shun unnecessary risks'.

Thirty-seven years later, the Duke of Newcastle, Secretary of State for the Southern Department, and effectively, British foreign minister, wrote in his own hand to the Duke of Cumberland, British commander in the

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7 Philip Yorke to Joseph Yorke, 24 July 1747, London, British Library, Department of Manuscripts, Additional Manuscripts (BL.Add.) 35363 f. 179; Horsbrugh diary, BL.Add. 50258 f. 8.

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Low Countries, 'I have by the King's order given a hint of the necessary attention to preserve your army. I am sure your Royal Highness will not on any account or from any expectation run a risk, which if it should happen must prove the ruin of the whole, for upon the preservation of your Royal Highness' army, weak as it is, depends the safety of this country, the Republic of Holland, and indeed, the whole alliance'.

Other reasons for the avoidance of decisive results were cited. A lack of determination has been implied from the conventions of the period. In 1781 Frederick II recorded a conversation with an Austrian envoy who had taken part in the recent War of the Bavarian Succession (1778–9): 'he spoke of the last war as not being really a war, and I replied that it should be regarded as a card-game between two friends'. It is also possible to focus on tactical and strategic factors that lessened the chance of victory. The first are readily apparent in naval warfare. The indecisiveness of naval battles was commented on and clearly owed much to the emphasis on the importance of numbers of ships in a line-of-battle order: this discouraged the numerically inferior navy from engaging. If the two navies were fairly evenly matched, it was difficult to obtain a decisive result, because the line-ahead formations that the mounting of guns on the broadside of warships produced, were powerful defensive positions. Thus, in 1778, Captain John Jervis wrote to the Secretary of the Admiralty, 'I have often told you, that two fleets of equal force never can produce decisive events, unless they are equally determined to fight it out; or the commander-in-chief of one of them misconducts his line'. It was difficult to conduct successful amphibious operations.

Strategic problems were also apparent on land, not least the absence of any significant technological, organizational or tactical gap between the major powers. In 1744 William Horsley observed that 'considering the numbers of people now in Europe, the multitude of garrisoned and well fortified towns, and the excellency, to which the art of war is arrived, and equally understood by all nations, the making wise and extensive conquests now-a-days seems to exist only in the theoretic imaginations of cabinet projectors'.

A more complete account was provided by Jacques Comte de Guibert, a French writer who was hostile to what he saw as current military practice. In his Essai général de tactique (1772), Guibert pressed for a citizenry under

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9 Newcastle to Cumberland, 5 April 1748, Windsor Castle, Royal Archives, Cumberland Papers 33/275.
10 Frederick II to Count Finckenstein, 8 July 1781, Politische Correspondenz Friedrichs des Großen (46 vols, Berlin, Duncken 1879–1939) XLVI, p. 16.
arms waging war to the death and, in more specific terms, more mobile and aggressive armies. Seven years later he published in his *Défense du système de guerre moderne* a sustained critique of what he saw as the defensive nature of contemporary European warfare.\(^{13}\)

The season of active warfare each year was, on the whole, shorter than later. Wars were in the most part not waged by conscripts. Civilian populations were, for the most part, less affected than they had been in the seventeenth century, especially than in Germany during the Thirty Years’ War. All these combine to suggest a degree of ‘limited’ warfare, as do the generally polite behaviour of officers to each other and the development of conventions for exchanging prisoners.

Yet it is also possible to emphasize the determination of rulers, ministers, generals and admirals to achieve victory and their ability to do so. There were decisive battles, campaigns and wars; and they were the usual objectives of warring states. Failure to achieve these results can often best be ascribed to an unobliging enemy, rather than to any lack of determination.

Peter the Great’s defeat of Charles XII at Poltava (1709) was one of the most decisive battles of the century. It led to the collapse of Swedish hopes to exploit Ukrainian disaffection in order to weaken Russia fatally and the end of Ukrainian autonomy, and was followed by the over-running of Sweden’s eastern Baltic provinces, and by Peter’s occupation of Poland.\(^{14}\) In the War of the Spanish Succession, there were apparently indecisive battles such as Luzzara (1702), although Luzzara could be considered ‘decisive’ because Eugene, although greatly outnumbered in Italy in 1702 by Franco-Spanish forces, fought Vendôme to a draw. This was the last battle there that Eugene was forced to fight against unfavourable odds. There were also more obviously decisive battles: the Anglo-Dutch Austrian victory at Blenheim (1704) drove the French from Germany; the Austro-Savoyard victory at Turin (1706) from Italy, and the Anglo-Dutch-Austrian victories at Ramillies (1706) and Oudenaarde (1708) from the Low Countries. However, French victories at Almanza (1707) and Brihuega (1710) won Spain for the Bourbon dynasty.\(^ {15}\)

In the War of the Polish Succession (1733–5), the Spanish victory at Bitonto (1734) drove the Austrians from southern Italy, a blow they were never to reverse. In the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–8), Mollwitz (1741) won Silesia for Frederick II, a gain consolidated by Hohenfriedberg (1745). Fontenoy (1745), Roucoux (1746) and Lauffeldt (1747) helped to win the Austrian Netherlands for the French, and Piacenza (1746) prevented the Bourbons from conquering northern Italy.


Contemporaries were in no doubt that these campaigns were being conducted with determination. Philip Yorke wrote of the French after the fall of Ostend in 1745, ‘I think their progress in the Netherlands this campaign has been greater than any of old Lewis’s [Louis XIV] except that of 1672’. Two years later, Thomas Orby Hunter, Deputy Paymaster of the British Forces in Flanders, noted of the French storming of Bergen-op-Zoom, ‘It has certainly been carried on with great fury by the enemy, without regard to the loss of men and every other expense’. French success in sieges (helped by the often weak resistance of Dutch garrisons) and superior numbers and greater unity of command were more important in the conquest of the Austrian Netherlands and Dutch Flanders than the hard-won victories of Roucoux and Lauffeldt, neither of which were followed up very energetically. Yet decisive campaigns are not the same as decisive conflicts, and Geoffrey Parker has argued that ‘wars still eternalized themselves … the Great Northern War endured from 1700 to 1721 in spite of Poltava; the War of the Spanish Succession continued … in spite of Blenheim, Ramilies, Oudenaarde and Malplaquet’. Both the writings and practice of Frederick II and most of his contemporaries indicate that they believed that battle could indeed be decisive – in fact too decisive for some of them at times. For Frederick the decisive battle was a necessity, dictated by his need for ‘short and lively wars’, and confirmed for us by the close attention he paid to perfecting his battle tactics. A few episodes deserve particular attention in this context. The campaign towards the end of 1745 compelled Austria to renounce Silesia once again, and knocked Saxony out of the war. The Prague–Kolin campaign of the early summer of 1757 which, if successful, might have led to territorial gains in northern Bohemia, condemned Austria to a position of permanent military inferiority, and probably doomed the whole Theresian experiment. In this context the Austrian victory at Kolin was ‘decisive’ in the reverse direction, truly ‘The Birthday of the Monarchy’. The major Prussian victory at Leuthen (1757) paralysed numerous Austrian initiatives later in the war, while the little battles of 1762 turned out to be decisive in the diplomatic and psychological setting of the time: Burkersdorf and Reichenbach broke Marshal Daun’s will to continue the contest for Silesia, and Freiberg lost southern Saxony (except for Dresden) and put the Austrians at an even greater disadvantage at the negotiating table. In the War of the Bavarian Succession, Frederick was seeking a decisive victory, but failed on account of his age, the decline of his army, and the Austrian counteractions. It later served his purpose to represent what had happened as a ‘cabinet war’, and this is the misleading version which has been passed down to posterity.

Contemporary commentators were in little doubt about the determina-

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tion with which Frederick sought victory. Colonel Horace St Paul, an Englishman who was aide de camp to Daun and colonel of an Austrian cavalry regiment, was in Dresden when the Prussians besieged and attempted to storm it in July 1760. He recorded of the second unsuccessful attempt, 'Il y a poussé ses troupes avec une très grande vivacité, et elles ont agi avec tout le courage imaginable, qu'on pourroit attribuera en partie à l'ivresse dans laquelle on a remarqué qu'elles etoient générale

ment'. The Prussian bombardment of the city did great damage and the heat from the burning buildings made service on the ramparts very unpleasant. Dresden was invested on 13 July and the siege raised on 30 July. During that period the garrison of 14,943 men and 193 pieces of artillery fired 26,266 cannon shot, including 1,402 of grapeshot, 326 bombs, 1,110 grenades of seven or ten pounds, 473 grenades by hand, 370,284 gunshots and 16,400 gunshots charged with grapeshot.18

Two years earlier, at Hochkirch, Daun used multiple columns to great effect against Frederick and showed that the armies of the period were not rendered inflexible by the notion of linear tactics. St Paul recorded of the dispositions for attack,

Tout le front du camp ennemi étant entierement couvert par un vallon et le village . . . il est par consequent impossible d'y former une attaque formelle. . . . À l'attaque du village de Hochkirch il y a principalement à observer après que les trois colonnes qui y marchent à cet effet, auront emporté les redoutes, le village, et forcé et suivi l'ennemi. . . . Comme cette attaque se doit envisager de même qu'un assaut, et que faute des hauteurs l'on ne sauroit la proteger par les gros canons, ainsi l'avant-garde ne se servira après la première décharge que du sabre à la main, et de la bayonette au bout du fusil.19

It is worth asking why Frederick's great victories were not more decisive than they actually were: why he restricted himself to gaining control of the battlefield?20 A number of reasons can be suggested. In the Seven Years' War Frederick could not spare the time for a lengthy pursuit of any one enemy, given the number of other enemies who were threats. His tightly disciplined troops could not be unleashed in a headlong pursuit without the danger of the units becoming less coherent, or even disintegrating through desertion, as soon as they were out of sight of their superiors. The unitary armies of the time, not yet organized in divisions or corps, were clumsy instruments, and there were few commanders of detached armies or forces who were psychologically prepared for independent decision-making. In addition, Frederick usually lost more men


20 'Quelques Remarques sur la façon de manoeuvre et de combattre du Roi de Prusse', St Paul papers ZBU B2/3/11.
than his enemies, even in the battles he won; while the Prussians were incompetent in siegework, and repeatedly lost momentum by becoming stuck in front of fortresses and fortress-cities: the most important episode of the kind was when Frederick was unable to consolidate the victory of Prague by destroying Prince Charles' army.

Siege warfare continued to be time-consuming and to inhibit the rapid movement of armies and decisive campaigns. Government resources and developments in fortification techniques combined to produce formidable defensive positions. Olmütz, besieged unsuccessfully by Frederick II in 1758, was one such: 'Quand les assiegeans n'attaqueroient que trois angles saillants du chemin couvert, ils auroient toujours cinq pieces ou ouvrages à prendre dans leur front d'attaque, avant de s'attacher au corps de la place, savoir deux lunettes ou places d'armes retranchées, une demie lune, un bastion détaché, et une contre-garde.' Yet other fortresses fell rapidly, the Prussians, for example, losing Pirna that September after it had been bombarded for two days. Following up a victory really effectively was usually as important as winning it, and sometimes as difficult or more so to achieve. It was possibly the more energetic following up of victories once won which gave much Revolutionary and Napoleonic campaigning an appearance of greater determination and decisiveness.

Determination and willpower as much as purely military aspects were, as so often, crucially important to decisiveness, a theme stressed in Ian Gentles' recent study of the New Model Army (1992). Equally, such political will could prevent or limit the consequences of 'decisive' engagements. Thus, for example, Frederick II really should have been beaten after Kolin or especially Kunersdorf, but neither battle knocked Prussia out of the Seven Years' War. Equally, neither did Leuthen or even Rossbach lead to the abandonment of the struggle by Frederick's enemies. Between major powers with access to equal resources, campaigns and wars were often decided by attrition, political will and coalition politics, rather than by decisive battles. That did not imply that contemporaries lacked the notion of decisive battles and did not seek them. Thus, in May 1758, St Paul wrote in his campaign journal, 'Si nous sommes dans le cas de donner une bataille, elle sera si decisive que le sort de la Böheme et de la Moravie dépend du succès qu'elle aura.'

There were of course decisive wars but it can be argued that they were between poorly matched powers. Thus, the Russo-Swedish war of 1741-3 was decided by the vigour of the Russian general Lacy, and his far larger army. The Swedish fortress of Willmanstrand was stormed in 1741 and the following year the Swedes, outmanoeuvred and held in Helsingfors (Helsinki), capitulated. However, had the Russians felt obliged to invade Sweden, they might have found the military challenge far more difficult.

21 Campaign journal, 8 June 1758, ZBU B2/3/25.
It was fortunate for Russia that in the three Russo-Swedish wars in the eighteenth century it was not necessary to invade, still less conquer, the Swedish homeland.

Other instances of decisive conflicts can be found in the defeat of rebellions, such as the Rakoczi rising in Hungary in 1703-11, the Jacobite rebellions in Britain in 1715-16 and 1745-6, the Pugachev serf rising in Russia in 1773-4, and the Irish rebellion of 1798. These led to pitched battles, such as Culloden (1746) and Tatischchevo (1774), but they were fought between armies that were armed and trained very differently, and if the concentrated firepower of the better-trained regulars could be brought to bear they were likely to prevail.

The vanquished at Culloden ‘based their warfare on a fundamental combination of speed, mobility and primal shock power, rejecting the tenets of modern, scientific technology – and logistics-orientated warfare embraced by most other European nation-states’. This Gaelic warfare has been seen as distinctive, but on a Europe-wide perspective this is not so. Instead, it can be argued that the combination of speed, mobility and shock power also characterized other ‘military systems’ that differed from the dominant European model with its concentration on infantry firepower and deployment in thin linear formations supported by artillery in order to maximize firepower. In Eastern Europe there was a much greater emphasis on speed, mobility and shock power, and this was true not only of the Turks and, in particular, their Tatar allies, but also of forces that stressed the tactical and strategic role of cavalry: Cossacks, Hungarians and Poles.

In the eighteenth century the contrast between these forces and other European armies increased because the percentage of cavalry in the latter decreased and their battlefield role became generally less important, although there were important exceptions, as for example with the Prussians at Rossbach (1757). Conflict between the two types of army represented an important sphere of decisive warfare, as in the Austro-Turkish wars of 1683-99 and 1716-18 and the Russo-Turkish wars of 1735-9, 1768-74 and 1787-92. It was also true of the Polish failure to confront Russian invasions successfully, as for example in 1733, and of the Russian suppression of Cossack independence.

This confrontation further served as a model for that between European and non-European forces. The latter of course were very varied: the spear-carrying tribesmen of the Celebes encountered by the British in the early 1790s were far different from the Javan and Sumatran sultanates with their extensive use of firearms. Nevertheless, in general, European

26 M.C. Ricklef, War, Culture and Economy in Java, 1677-1726 (Sydney, Asian Studies Association of Australia, 1993).
forces relied less on shock power and more on firepower than the non-
European armies they confronted. Their lead in this field was threatened
by the willingness of the latter to adopt European technology, equipment
and, in part, tactics. Thus, some Indian rulers deployed flintlock-armed
infantry battalions, while artillery pieces were also imitated. At the end
of the eighteenth century, the Turks also showed a greater interest in
organizing part of the army along European lines and arming themselves
with European-style weapons. They also sought, without success, to
purchase British warships.

Decisive warfare by European forces can be readily seen in the extra-
European dimension, largely because the gap in technological, tactical
and organizational capabilities and methods was greater than in Europe
with the exceptions already noted. Thus, victories at Plassey (1757) and
Buxar (1764) over vastly greater forces led to British control of Bengal,
the basis of its subsequent domination of southern Asia. The British
victory over Tipu Sultan of Mysore in the Fourth Mysore War of 1799,
culminating with the successful storming of Seringapatam, led to British
control of southern India.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that decisive results could
only be obtained in such circumstances. Instead it is clear that not only
victory in particular engagements, but also triumph in war could result
from conflict between states using similar techniques. This was true of
both European and non-European warfare. Examples of major Asian
victories include the victory of Nadir Shah of Persia over the Mogul
Emperor of India, Muhammad Shah, at Karnal (1739), the Afghan defeat
of the Marathas at Panipat (1761), and the Egyptian–Palestinian defeat of
Turkish forces at Darayya (1771).

Decisiveness in conflict among European states was most clearly
demonstrated in naval battles. There were indecisive engagements or
failures to engage fully: the battle of Toulon (1744), Boscawen's failure to
intercept the French fleet sailing to Canada (1755), Byng's failure off
Minorca (1756), and the Anglo-French battles of Ushant (1778) and
the Virginia Capes (1781). It would be possible to produce an account that
emphasized the factors inhibiting the successful use of naval power: this
would include the technological limitations of wind-dependent wooden
ships, the manpower and supply problems posed by the need for
substantial crews, the tactical difficulties of forcing engagements and the

27 B.P. Lenman, 'The Transition to European Military Ascendancy in India, 1600–1800',
in John A. Lynn, ed., Tools of War. Instruments, Ideas, and Institutions of Warfare,
28 D.B. Ralston, Importing the European Army. The Introduction of European Military Techniques
and Institutions into the Extra-European World, 1600–1914 (Chicago, University of Chicago
Press, 1990), pp. 49–51; Sir Robert Ainslie, British Ambassador in Constantinople, to
Marquis of Carmarthen, British Foreign Secretary, 25 April and 10 May 1786, 9 August
and 25 September 1787, London, Public Record Office, Foreign Office 78/7 f. 110–11,
151–2, 199.
29 A.H. Jouhah, Revolt in Palestine in the Eighteenth Century. The Era of Shaykh Zahir al-'Umar
strategic problems of maintaining all-weather blockades. The expense of a fleet and the financial and administrative burdens that naval warfare posed\textsuperscript{30} could all be emphasised. Thus, a naval corollary could be found for the emphasis on the logistical\textsuperscript{31} and other limitations of European land warfare.

Yet there were decisive naval victories. These were obtained not only when there was a technological gap, most obviously the Russian victory over the Turks at Chesmé (1770) and, to a lesser extent, the Russian victories over the Turks in the Black Sea – near Ochakov in 1788 and near Tendra in 1790 – but also between technologically more evenly matched forces – the French over the British at Beachy Head (1690); the British over the French at Barfleur (1692), the two battles of Cape Finisterre (1747), Lagos and Quiberon Bay (1759) and the Saints (1782); the British over the Spaniards off Cape Passaro (1718) and the Swedish galley fleet over the Russians at Svensksund (1790).

It was not possible to ‘control’ the oceans – they were too vast and naval technology was too primitive – but the British victories in 1692, 1718, 1747 and 1759 were strategically decisive: Cape Passaro wrecked Spanish naval power in the Mediterranean and thus the practicality of plans for the reconquest of Spanish Italy. The other battles ended the danger of French invasion of Britain and, in the last case, ensured that Britain was able to prevail in the colonial and maritime struggle with France. Spain’s subsequent entry into the war on the French side did not redress the naval situation, and in 1762 British forces campaigned around the globe. They helped the Portuguese resist a Bourbon invasion, fought the French in Westphalia, and captured Martinique from the French and Havana and Manila from the Spaniards. British success was reflected in the terms of the Peace of Paris (1763) and this amply demonstrated the ‘global reach capabilities’ of European power and the potential decisiveness of warfare in the period. Americans and Canadians can hardly think of eighteenth-century warfare as indecisive. Britain’s growth as a world power was very much an eighteenth-century development that was principally due to military success, and the French were very well aware that this was decisive.

Decisiveness could also be seen in European land warfare. Parker’s suggestion that the Great Northern and Spanish Succession wars should be seen as indecisive reflects their character as umbrella wars that comprehended a number of different conflicts. The battles and campaigns themselves could be decisive. Victory at Turin (1706) and the


conquest of Naples (1707) ended the struggle for control of Italy with a decisive Austrian triumph. Poltava and the campaign of the following year left Russia in secure control of Livonia. Similarly, the Russian overrunning of Poland in 1733–4, the Franco-Sardinian conquest of the Milanese in the winter of 1733–4, and the Spanish conquest of Naples (1734) and Sicily (1735), were rapid campaigns that set the basic configuration of the peace that ended the War of the Polish Succession.

Military decisiveness can again be seen clearly on the eve of the French Revolution. It is all too easy to concentrate on the inconclusive War of the Bavarian Succession (1778–9). The Austrian Field Marshal Lacy was able to use massive concentrations of defensive forces in the North Bohemian hills to thwart Frederick II's bold plans for the conquest of Bohemia. Defensive strength negated offensive power and thus contributed to indecisiveness. The war was a logistical triumph for Austria, though one that exhausted the treasury, helping to produce pressure for peace, and it was a military disaster for Frederick. The Prussian Army was ravaged by dysentery and desertion, and unable to gain the advantages of surprise and speed. Major weaknesses in the Prussian Army were revealed: the absence of sufficient supplies; demoralized infantry; indisciplined cavalry; poor medical services; and an inadequate artillery train.32 Frederick's failure can be compared with his problems when he invaded Bohemia in 1744.

Yet the War of the Bavarian Succession indicated not so much the indecisiveness of ancien régime warfare as the defensive strength of the Austrian position. Within a decade of its close, forces were to be assembled across the whole of Eastern Europe fighting (Austria, Denmark, Russia, Sweden, Turkey) or preparing to fight (Poland, Prussia) for goals that seemed necessary and/or possible. The Prussians pulled back from invading Bohemia in 1790 and Livonia in 1791 and it is not therefore possible to assess how far a major war pitching Prussia against the alliance of Austria and Russia would have led to a decisive conflict; but it is clear from the conflicts that did occur, and the war plans that were drawn up, that there was no indication that existing military methods had run their course. Indeed, it has recently been argued that the Russians had benefited from their need to respond to the special problems of warfare with the Turks in 1768–74 and 1787–92 by adopting 'some of the same operational and tactical expediencies which the French would put into practice between 1792 and 1815'. The Russians developed credible tactical offensive formations, compact mobile forces and a logistical system of advanced bases and supply magazines.33

Russian logistical successes pose a serious question mark against the use of G. Perjes' data on grain supplies and bread production to suggest that European campaigns must have been both slow and largely confined to a

small number of agriculturally rich areas. Russian military successes in general indicate the flexibility of ancien régime military organization. The latter theme can also be stressed with reference to mid-eighteenth century Austrian reforms, to the development of French tactical thinking and artillery after 1763, and to Austrian, British and French interest in light infantry. The development of light infantry from the 1740s onwards was important in developing a capacity for mobility and adaptability.34

Nevertheless, an emphasis on the defeat of ancien régime armies by revolutionary forces can suggest that they were in some respect redundant. The British failed to defeat the American revolutionaries; Joseph II of Austria lost control of the Austrian Netherlands (Belgium) in 1789 after his troops were defeated at Turnhout by an irregular force helped by snipers and by women throwing stones from the rooftops; French Revolutionary forces were to overrun much of Western Europe; and the Spaniards were to be defeated in South and Central America in a series of Wars of Liberation/Independence. In December 1789 Robert Arbuthnot commented, 'I think that sovereigns had better all disband their regular troops, as we now find they are no match for a mob'.35

Such an approach is, however, too simple. First, it is important to note the extent to which 'patriot' movements were defeated: the Genevans by Berne, France and Sardinia in 1782; the Dutch by the Prussians in 1787; those in the Austrian Netherlands and the Prince-Bishopric of Liège by the Austrians and Prussians, respectively, in 1790; the Poles by the Russians in 1794; and the Irish by the British in 1798. The suppression of the anti-revolutionary risings in the Vendée and elsewhere in France in the 1790s can also be regarded in this light.

Secondly, the revolutionary triumphs already referred to were hard-won and partial. The American revolutionaries were unsuccessful in conquering Canada or holding onto New York and Charleston, both causes of major American defeats, and their eventual success at Yorktown owed much to the French.36 Later French successes in the Revolutionary Wars owed much to the greater size of their forces, as at Valmy and Jemappes (1792), although at Valmy enthusiasm was also a critical factor:

35 Arbuthnot to Sir Robert Murray Keith, Envoy Extraordinary in Vienna, 28 December 1789, BL.Add. 35541 f. 367.
the Duke of Brunswick had no stomach for a fight. French armies were also defeated, as at Neerwinden (1793) and Amberg (1796), so that 'overall the French revolutionary armies gained about as many victories as they sustained defeats'. If their British, Dutch and Spanish opponents in the 1790s did not field powerful armies, the Austrians and Russians were impressive forces.

The years immediately preceding the outbreak of the French Revolutionary Wars in 1792 therefore provided examples of decisive warfare both between states and in the suppression of popular movements. The Prussian campaign of 1787, was particularly successful. On 13 September the Prussians invaded and advanced to Nymegen. The principal Patriot force, 7,000-strong under their Commander-in-Chief, the unimpressive Rhinegrave of Salm, abandoned Utrecht in panic on the night of 15–16 September. The Prussians entered Utrecht on 16 September, Gorcum, after a short bombardment, on 17 September, Dordrecht on 18 September and Delft on 19 September. The last Patriot stronghold, Amsterdam, surrendered on 10 October 1787. The dykes had not been breached as in 1672, and it had not proved necessary to storm any cities.

Unequal struggle as it was, it is easy to appreciate on the basis of the Prussian success in 1787, why it was widely anticipated that the Duke of Brunswick would have another swift success against the Revolutionary French in 1792. What is clear from considering Prussian activity and plans in 1787–92 is that there was no sense of a 'crisis in strategy', of a redundant military system that was unable to achieve military and political objectives. This is more generally true of the European states in the period and can be seen in the sole extra-European war waged in the early 1790s, the Third Mysore War between Britain and Tipu, Sultan of Mysore, in 1790–2.

The war had begun as a result of Tipu's attack on a British ally and Mysore was far from being a vulnerable state. Indeed, initial British operations in 1790 achieved less than had been hoped. Nevertheless, when Earl Cornwallis, the British Governor-General and Commander-in-Chief, took personal charge in January 1791, the situation improved. Cornwallis had already acted to reform the forces in India, and, in doing so, reflected his openness to new ideas. Thus, in 1790 he wrote of the sepoy units,

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39 T. P. Pfau, Geschichte des Preussischen Feldzuges in der Provinz Holland im Jahr 1787 (Berlin, Rothmann, 1790); P. de Witt, Une Invasion prussienne en Hollande en 1787 (Paris, n.p., 1886); E. Senckler, Der Preussische Feldzug in den Niederlanden im Jahre 1787 (Berlin, Felix, 1893).
It is highly expedient and indeed absolutely necessary for the public good that the officers who are destined to serve in those corps should come out at an early period of life, and devote themselves entirely to the Indian service; a perfect knowledge of the language, and a minute attention to the customs and religious prejudices of the sepoys being qualifications for that line which cannot be dispensed with . . . how dangerous a disaffection in our native troops would be to our existence in this country.  

In March 1791 Cornwallis stormed Bangalore where he captured 'upwards of 100 serviceable pieces of ordnance, near fifty of which were brass . . . and an immense depot of military stores', a testimony to Tipu’s strength. That December Sevendroog, a hill fort that had been judged impregnable, was stormed after the artillery had opened a breach, and in February 1792 Seringapatam was successfully besieged and Tipu sued for peace.

The ability of Britain to fight a war successfully at such a distance, not least at the same time as war was being seriously considered with Russia as a result of the Ochakov Crisis of 1791, was a testimony to the range of British power. In contrast, France had not felt able to intervene in Vietnam in 1788 despite treaty commitments to one of the parties in the civil conflict there. Britain’s ability to act across the oceans was to be demonstrated fully during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars and is the clearest example of the global military decisiveness of eighteenth-century European states.

It is possibly necessary in conclusion to emphasize the extent to which decisiveness, like victory or ‘total war’ or national mobilization, has to be seen not only in an eighteenth-century context, but also in a variety of lights. Decisiveness can be understood to relate to conflict with similar or dissimilar forces, and can be considered in a number of different chronological perspectives. Exactly how decisive warfare is seen depends on the perspective of the viewer; for example, the War of the Austrian Succession can be seen as decisive from a Prussian perspective, but inconclusive in terms of the Anglo-French struggle, although in both cases hostilities were resumed in the mid-1750s. The extent to which most conflicts ended with a negotiated settlement, and therefore that an occupation of territory could be ‘decisive’ insofar as it influenced the

41 Cornwallis to Henry Dundas, President of the Board of Control, 4 April 1790, PRO. 30/11/151 f. 40.
42 Cornwallis to the Court of Directors of the East India Company 20 April 1791, PRO. 30/11/155 f. 19.
43 Cornwallis to Court of Directors, 26 December 1791, PRO. 30/11/155 f. 134–8.
negotiations, has to be considered. Campaigning could lead to major losses of manpower so that, for example, the unsuccessful Prussian invasion of Bohemia in 1744 was 'decisive without a battle'.

In its widest sense, eighteenth-century conflicts on land do appear inconclusive because they were frequently coalition conflicts and it was impossible for all coalition members to achieve their aims. A few might but most had to settle for an unsatisfactory compromise or a return to the status quo. Furthermore, coalition warfare could inhibit a determination to achieve decisive warfare. Governments did not necessarily wish to make their allies too powerful by excessively weakening rival powers, as the kaleidoscopic nature of international relations ensured that alliances changed with some frequency. Furthermore, the notion of the balance of power encouraged a degree of reluctance about major shifts in power. Thus, the death of the Emperor Joseph I in 1711 and his succession by his brother, 'Charles III' of Spain, made the British government reluctant to fight on to secure a Habsburg Spain and thus a tremendous accretion of power to the Habsburgs. In 1719 the British with reason thought their French allies reluctant to defeat Philip V of Spain, Louis XIV's grandson, who had only gained the throne of Spain thanks to his grandfather's efforts during the War of the Spanish Succession. That, however, did not mean that the warfare itself was indecisive, while coalitions could aim for major territorial changes: as with Sweden's opponents in the Great Northern War, Austria's in the War of the Austrian Succession and Prussia's in the Seven Years' War.

The stereotypical view of eighteenth-century 'indecisiveness' is due to a lack of attention to the details of campaigning and strategy, to a failure to put eighteenth-century operations in context, and equally to a failure to define 'decisive'. There was nothing inherently indecisive about seventeenth and eighteenth-century strategy and tactics, except perhaps at sea, although even then the intention of naval tactics was to ensure a decisive conclusion. Decisive battles could result on land and sea, as indeed they also did in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period. Indecision was, if anything, a product of political rather than military factors, especially the inability of states to exploit fully their military potential. The French Revolution did open up new possibilities, and it was these logistical and manpower factors rather than any significant tactical changes that explain early French victories. Later French defeats resulted not from France's opponents adopting her tactics, but rather from their copying French methods of raising larger armies, particularly in the case of Austria and Prussia. Tactics, while modified, remained essentially the same. Corps and divisions were evolutionary developments


47 Luvaas, 'Frederick's Campaign', p. 19.
with roots in the eighteenth century, not products of Revolutionary France. Lastly, it is necessary to emphasize the global context, the ability of European powers to operate outside Europe, and their success in the eighteenth century, both within and outside Europe, in frequently defeating non-European powers. A history of eighteenth-century European warfare that ignores this wider context is of limited value.

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