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# European Warfare 1453–1815

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## **Problems in Focus**

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The effects of warfare on state formation in the early seventeenth century remained ambivalent. In some cases protracted war led to the contracting out or 'privatisation' of formerly public functions and tasks as in Spain, and to a decentralisation of political authority. In other cases it did not affect the constitutional structures and the fiscal system very deeply at all, because the cost of warfare was partly or totally transferred to conquered or occupied provinces. France was perhaps the only country where warfare led directly to political centralisation and some sort of 'absolutism', although even here this process was qualified by the survival or indeed growth of a venal bureaucracy and of innumerable fiscal and legal privileges. These phenomena were as much a result of the financial crisis which the war had brought about as an obstacle to a truly efficient system of financing the war effort, which only one European country managed to create in this period on any considerable scale: the Dutch Republic, seemingly one of the least warlike of the European powers.

### 3. Warfare in the Old Regime 1648–1789

PETER WILSON

#### THE CHARACTERISTICS OF OLD-REGIME WARFARE

At about 11 a.m. on 11 May 1745 a large column of British and Hanoverian infantry approached a line of French troops near the village of Fontenoy, close to the modern Franco-Belgian border. When the opposing forces were only 30 metres apart, an English officer allegedly stepped forward and cordially invited the French to fire first. This story, though almost certainly apocryphal, nonetheless seems to epitomise warfare in old-regime Europe.

Conflicts in this period are almost universally thought of as more sedate, narrow and limited in comparison with earlier and later wars.<sup>1</sup> Those of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries are regarded as particularly ferocious, but also as a source of military innovation, when new tactics and weaponry were developed and standing armies came into being. Similarly, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815) seem the dawn of a new era of mass-citizen armies, grand strategy and military decisiveness. War in both periods involved fundamental issues stirring the passions of the participants; religion and domestic political power in the former era, nationalism and revolutionary ideology in the latter.

These military factors are related to wider social, political and economic aspects characterising these periods generally as distinct phases in European history. Thus, the religious and civil strife of the so-called Confessional Age (1517–1648) was replaced by relative tranquillity under the rule of largely absolutist monarchies. These monopolised violence, depriving their inhabitants of the means to oppose them militarily, and directed their efforts outwards into limited external war fought in their personal dynastic interest. Armies, it is widely believed, became divorced

from the societies they were paid to protect, recruiting themselves from the politically and economically disenfranchised, while remaining under the command of a privileged, aristocratic elite. The changes associated with the French Revolution disturbed these structures, just as they undermined the rest of the old regime, heralding a new era for military, as well as political and social history.

This is not the place to debate the validity of this standard periodisation of European history, nor to re-examine its implicit relationship between military and wider historical change. One important point does, however, need to be made. Like many other accepted generalisations about European development, the concept of old-regime warfare as limited is based primarily on French and German historiography. Given both the German tradition of regarding political structures as largely militarily determined, and the historical pre-eminence of Louis XIV's France as Europe's premier absolutist monarchy and great power, the link between absolutism and permanent, professional armies has been assumed as a defining characteristic for the continent as a whole. The subsequent rise of Prussia and the influence of its army as a general European model only serves to reinforce this point.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, there has been a tendency to regard the campaigns waged in north-western and central Europe as paradigmatic of all old-regime warfare. Not only are the exploits of great German and French generals, like Prince Eugene and Maurice de Saxe, exceptionally well documented, but this geographical area also saw most of Britain's limited involvement in continental land warfare prior to the Peninsular War. The understandable interest in the Duke of Marlborough, as well as the forces under later, generally less successful, British generals, has helped concentrate Anglophone research on the same areas, even to the relative neglect of British military involvement in Spain in the early eighteenth century. This has been valuable for highlighting aspects that were indeed important features of the period as a whole. However, inevitably, there has been a tendency to measure other developments against these, especially French models, as well as a neglect of change over both time and space.

The standard scheme looks far less logical when viewed from the perspective of eastern Europe, or the continent's northern

and southern fringes. The political events used to define and delineate the time-span derive from French and German history and make only partial sense when applied elsewhere. The Peace of Westphalia (1648), which ended the Thirty Years War in central Europe and confirmed the independence of the Dutch Republic from Spanish rule, did not end other major conflicts. Franco-Spanish hostilities continued until 1659, and even the terms of the Westphalian Settlement relating to the Baltic were not fully implemented until 1653. Disputes over maritime access to this area, as well as the lucrative river tolls and customs duties levied along its shoreline, flared up again only two years later, representing not a new departure, but the continuation of a regional power struggle dating from the early sixteenth century. These conflicts were related to similarly protracted hostilities between Poland and Russia for the control of an area between the Baltic and the Black Sea larger than the total extent of France. Though increasingly open to western influences, neither Poland nor Russia ever became a carbon copy of French or German models, filtering instead new ideas through indigenous traditions, themselves still capable of producing innovations, and pursuing distinct military paths; for the Poles an ultimately disastrous one. Both the Baltic and eastern conflicts continued until the complex peace settlements of 1718–21 confirmed Sweden's relative decline and Russia's emergence as a world power.<sup>3</sup>

Equally, the epochal character of the French Revolution must be questioned when seen from a pan-European perspective. True, the revolutionaries abolished the French monarchy and eventually marched across most of Europe, redrawing a large part of its political map in the process. All the major powers were compelled to adapt, either by adopting French methods wholesale, or by accelerating existing reform processes. However, neither France nor its revolution was the sole source of change. Both Russia and especially the Austrian Habsburg monarchy drew on long experience of warfare against the Ottoman Turks which influenced their military traditions in ways often overlooked. In particular, Austria's geographical location gave its military establishment a Janus face, incorporating the experience derived from conflicts with conventional western opponents like France, as well as lessons learnt under very different conditions against

Hungarian rebels and the Ottoman hordes. In this sense, the Habsburg army acted as a conduit for eastern and western influence to spread in both directions. For example, its light infantry (*Grenzer*) and cavalry (hussars), initially raised to oppose the Turks, were employed in the West, where they were widely emulated. Similarly, confrontation with Austrian disciplined tactics and mass firepower compelled the Turks to modify their own forces with French and renegade German expertise.<sup>4</sup>

The protracted struggles between the Habsburgs and the Sultan also provide evidence that the era of religious wars did not end with the Westphalian compromise between Catholics and Protestants. The relief of Vienna, besieged during the great Turkish attack of 1683, was a pan-European enterprise, celebrated as an achievement equal to the great Christian naval victory of Lepanto (1571). Later wars still displayed the spirit of a baroque crusade long after the Habsburg court gave up its initial hopes of recovering Jerusalem. Both sides fought with great determination and brutality, massacring the civilian population of captured cities even in the last Turkish War of the eighteenth century in 1787–92.<sup>5</sup>

Even Britain cannot be slotted easily into the usual generalisations, not least because it was never an absolute monarchy and yet became one of Europe's most powerful states. Indeed, the British experience, along with that of the Dutch Republic, stands as an important corrective to the standard linkage of absolutism and military power. The Dutch defeated the monarchical pretensions of their own House of Orange, as well as their former Spanish overlords, while even after the Restoration of 1660, England remained very different from absolutist France. Yet both states were already significant powers by 1648, particularly at sea, and developed fiscal–military infrastructures of great potential. Unlike France, where the crown used the reworked ideology of absolutist kingship to legitimise taxation and sustain creditworthiness, both Britain and the Dutch Republic created formal mechanisms to foster a relatively broad consensus across the landed and commercial elite. In the British variant, as it became established after the 1688 political settlement, this enabled the state to tap an expanding economy without provoking the sort of elite protest which had undermined many sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century European states. Britain's island

location enabled such fiscal power to be translated into military power without the need for a large domestic military establishment. Cash subsidies, along with political influence and naval support, won Britain the continental allies needed to match France's superior human and material resources.<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, the concept of British exceptionalism should not be pushed too far. Its standing army was still relatively numerous and expanded greatly in wartime. It was also deployed as a guardian of civil order in a manner not dissimilar to continental forces, and was likewise used to crush political opposition to English rule in the subject kingdoms of Ireland and Scotland. Similarly, absolutism was not without its own mechanisms to foster legitimacy and consensus, even where it sought to curb and remove traditional representative institutions. Centred on court patronage and the public representational display of royal rule, these could be comparatively successful, as indicated by the resilience of the Austrian monarchy despite the continued pressure of major wars. However, these structures were cumbersome and relatively inflexible, making it difficult for reforming monarchs, like Joseph II (1780–90), to tap other sources of wealth. Critically, where they broke down completely, absolutism had little to put in their place, as the experience of late eighteenth-century France graphically illustrates.

Finally, the orthodox interpretation of limited warfare looks less certain when its implicit comparisons over time are reconsidered. Given the obvious importance of weapons technology, writing on war is prone to chronicling a 'progress of destruction'; a false teleology based on the real, but misleading, premise that modern weapons clearly have a far greater destructive potential than their predecessors. Technology cannot be wrenched from its wider context, and to write the history of warfare around the development of weaponry produces a distortion. For example, modern weapons systems are extremely expensive, yet most states, including the superpowers, spend proportionally less of their total central budgets on defence than those of eighteenth-century Europe.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, when set against the general level of technological development and manufacturing ability, old-regime weaponry was clearly at the contemporary cutting edge, or as one recent writer has put it, in the 'category of a space shuttle rather than an aircraft carrier'.<sup>8</sup>

## WAR AND SOCIETY

The themes raised in the previous section can be continued in an examination of the wider impact of war and its relation to society; areas which have been opened up by new research. For military-civil relations to exist at all, soldiers first have to emerge as a distinct social group. This process began in the late fifteenth century with the growing employment of professional mercenaries whose clothing, attitudes and behaviour already set them apart from the rest of society. The economics of early modern warfare widened the divide by compelling most soldiers to become migrants, travelling from one source of insecure employment to the next, in contrast to the bulk of the rural population which remained tied emotionally, economically and often legally to a fixed locality. Attempts by the state to regulate and control soldiers' behaviour, along with the requirements imposed by weaponry and military necessity, also helped set soldiers apart. Already under separate jurisdiction in the early sixteenth century, soldiers were subject to a growing body of disciplinary codes, joined from the 1580s by different forms of drill prescribing precise physical movements and intended to instil a new sense of obedience and subordination.

Improvements in the state's ability to maintain soldiers over longer periods of time failed to diminish its desire to impose its authority upon them. On the contrary, the system of regulation hardened as the military population became more sedentary with permanent employment in standing armies. The earlier emphasis on drill and discipline gave way after 1648 to a host of regulations fixing recruitment, conditions of service, clothing, billeting and discharge. Simultaneously, uniforms became standardised and extended even to the officers by the early eighteenth century. By the 1720s the period of innovation and experimentation was essentially over and the issue of regulatory codes declined in both frequency and volume, as most armies had their essential administrative systems already in place. While these were still subject to repetition and modification, the basic shape remained unchanged until the next century.

While this certainly marked soldiers out as a distinct group, it would be wrong to see them as isolated or detached from the rest of early modern society. First, they were simply one group

among many in an already highly stratified social system. All sections of the population, including the nobility, were subject to codes of behaviour and marked by varying degrees of privilege and burdens. These rules were enforced not only by church and state, but by the groups themselves, which often enjoyed their own semi-autonomous jurisdiction, as with the internal management of universities, monasteries and urban guilds. Thus, the internal structure of an army, with its own hierarchy of ranks, customs, jurisdiction and forms of punishment, was indeed uniquely military, but not entirely dissimilar to the basic structure of other social groups.

Furthermore, though conscious of its own distinctiveness, no army was entirely cut off from other sections of society. Despite the permanence of armies as organisations, the composition of their actual personnel continued to fluctuate. Most armies had a core of long-serving soldiers whom they sought to retain, but filled the rest of the ranks with men for whom military service was often one source of employment among many over their lifetime. Even states using limited forms of conscription, such as Sweden, Prussia and later, Denmark and Austria, tended to release soldiers back into the civilian economy for large parts of the year to economise on their maintenance. The remaining professionals often only did duty on two or three days a week, supplementing their meagre pay by working on the remainder as servants, building workers, hawkers and, usually illegally, tradesmen.

In addition, many soldiers were married or had long-term unofficial relationships, something which became more feasible with the greater permanence of military formations. Around half or more of Prussian privates were married in the late eighteenth century, a proportion often exceeded in other armies, despite official restrictions. Further daily contact with civilians came from the practice of billeting soldiers in towns and villages. France began accommodating its army in barracks comparatively early on, partly thanks to the vigorous fortress-building programme which turned many frontier towns into military installations. Over 300 towns had barracks by 1742 and by 1775 total capacity reached 200 000 men, equivalent to its peacetime establishment.<sup>9</sup> This, however, was exceptional, and most soldiers were lodged in inns, as in Britain, or in sheds and shacks scattered throughout a town or clustered along its fortifications, or as was more often the

case, simply quartered directly in the poorer burghers' houses and peasant farms. The phenomenon of the garrison town remained, until the barrack construction programmes of the 1790s, characterised by the intermingling of soldiers and civilians rather than by a distinct military presence.<sup>10</sup>

These points of contact could also operate in the opposite direction. Most continental states used militias as a reserve to supplement or augment the field army in times of crisis. Militiamen were either drafted temporarily into the regular forces or embodied as field formations, as in Bavaria and many other German territories, or mobilised as second-line troops for garrison duty and home defence as in France, Spain and the Italian states. Either way, the training and service of militiamen, along with the discharge of professional soldiers temporarily or permanently back into civil society, transmitted a general familiarity with weapons handling and military service that is surprising in an age otherwise characterised by the state's attempts to monopolise violence and demilitarise society.

This raises the question whether, as some have argued, eighteenth-century society was militarised. Certainly, there is considerable evidence that, after 1648, most Europeans came to accept the permanence of armies and the validity of war as a means of resolving international disputes. However grudgingly, they also bore the heavy fiscal and manpower demands without resorting to the sort of violent protest that had characterised the early seventeenth century. That they should do so was clearly in the interests of the state, which made great efforts to encourage compliance, using exaggerated images of the disorderly soldiery and the horrors of the Thirty Years War to magnify the virtues of its new, disciplined forces.

Military ways of thinking were probably most pronounced within the social elite, particularly the old aristocracy, which reasserted its control of command positions in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in most countries, displacing officers of non-noble origin who had formed a significant proportion of the earlier mercenary captains. The aristocracy's near-monopoly of officer posts proved vital in the defence of noble privilege and allowed it, particularly in central and eastern Europe, to accommodate itself with absolutism by partially reinventing itself in the concept of state service.<sup>11</sup>

It has been argued<sup>12</sup> that this was particularly pronounced in Prussia, a factor of general historical importance given that state's later domination of Germany. The nobles' hold on command and administration, along with their stake in the process of recruitment, fused military attitudes with political authoritarianism so that the means of maintaining national defence became those sustaining the rule of a narrow, socially conservative elite. In short, society was militarised in the interests of those in power. The case for 'social militarisation' has, undoubtedly, been exaggerated, certainly for the period before 1789, and there is the danger, not always avoided, of generalising from the Prussian example. Even here, recent research reveals that there was no direct link between the famous Prussian Canton system of limited conscription, and the Junkers' defence of their socioeconomic position and political influence.<sup>13</sup>

Re-examination of military-civil relations before 1789 also casts doubts on the standard explanation of the old regime's failure to withstand the French revolutionary armies. By championing the concept of the citizen-in-arms, itself hardly a novelty, the revolutionaries supposedly bridged the gap that separated army from society, uniting both through the common ideology of nationalism, universal rights and the defence of the homeland. Much of this stems from an uncritical acceptance of what the revolutionaries and later European liberals *said* they wanted, especially their rhetoric of national sovereignty mediated by a liberal, representative assembly, rather than direct monarchical rule. As the alleged henchmen of the discredited monarchies, old-regime armies were naturally portrayed in a poor light to legitimise the Revolution's own claims.

While much did change after 1789, this should not blind us to important elements of continuity. The recruitment base of most old-regime armies, including the British, was not as narrow as is commonly supposed. Given the fluctuation in personnel, the total proportion of the population with direct experience of military life may have reached 3 per cent, while even in peacetime established strengths of major powers stood at half this or more, a figure roughly comparable with levels in the next century. The fact that the majority of soldiers came from the poor or propertyless classes, while the officers were drawn from a narrow privileged elite, might well be reprehensible in liberal

terms, but nonetheless reflected the social distribution of power under the old regime.

It was the 'middle class' of propertied, non-nobles that was under-represented and it was precisely this group that was pushing for control over war-making. The Revolution and post-revolutionary political settlements did grant this group greater influence, but left the broader social composition of armies relatively unchanged. French conscription was far from universal in the 1790s as, in practice, there were still exemptions and ways to dodge the draft. Such exemptions were confirmed in most early nineteenth-century systems, and though the bourgeoisie did gain greater access to officer posts, this too was partly reversed in most countries after 1815. Conversely, some important links between soldier and civilian were eroded after 1789, particularly by the construction of barracks, which accelerated in the nineteenth century as governments feared that the political reliability of their armies might be compromised by contact with subversive social elements.

### THE GROWTH OF EUROPEAN ARMIES

The evolution of the standing army was a long and complex process, dating back to the mercenary companies paid to guard palaces and castles by many sixteenth-century rulers. However, it was only after 1648 that these were consolidated in their final form. The leading military power and model for most of late seventeenth-century Europe was unquestionably France, which reorganised the administration and structure of its forces in the 1660s to create the largest single permanent force in the continent. Directed by the war ministers Le Tellier and Louvois, these reforms were a direct response to the problems encountered when fighting Habsburg Austria and Spain in 1635–59, when the existing fiscal-administrative structure proved incapable of meeting the mounting demands. Centralised and subordinated to direct royal authority, the new structure reduced the abuses and wastage which had undermined earlier French military efforts and enabled Louis XIV to field forces which were qualitatively as well as quantitatively superior to those of his predecessors. However, this process was never completed before the collapse of

the Bourbon monarchy, and its scope and effectiveness were constantly constrained by the very nature of French absolutism, which relied on the management and appeasement of privileged interest groups to sustain its political authority.

Though numerically superior, the French were not alone in maintaining permanent forces by 1648 (see Table 3.1). The Austrians already had substantial numbers and continued to field the largest German army throughout the old regime. Old powers like Spain, as well as new or emerging ones like Sweden, Denmark, England and the Dutch Republic, also had considerable forces. Unlike France, however, none reformed or modernised the structures developed during the early seventeenth-century wars, retaining instead existing systems of funding, recruitment and organisation, with only limited or piecemeal efforts to assert greater uniformity and state control.

Significant change came only when these armies encountered the 'new-model' French forces after 1667. The latter's rapid defeat of Spain in the War of Devolution (1667–68) was followed by further successes in the more serious test of Dutch War (1672–79), when Louis XIV made the largest territorial gains of the last 250 years of the French monarchy. Not only did established powers like Spain and Austria suffer reverses, but the Dutch found serious deficiencies in their more recently developed system of defence. Similarly, Sweden, whose successes in the Thirty Years War had discouraged reform, was defeated by comparatively insignificant Brandenburg-Prussia in 1675, with the subsequent temporary loss of its German possessions.

The shock of defeat, along with the sheer extent of French power – by 1648 Louis XIV had the largest army seen in Europe since the Roman Empire – forced these states to reform and expand their own forces after 1679. The next decade saw an explosion of activity lasting till the 1720s which gave shape to most of Europe's standing armies. Often this was associated with a political shift to more absolutist rule. For example, Swedish military reforms after 1680 involved the recovery of alienated crown lands to provide a more secure financial base for military expansion. Denmark witnessed a similar process and both monarchies sought to increase their executive authority. James II's reorganisation and expansion of English and Scottish armies was also related to his efforts to reduce Parliament's fiscal control.

Table 3.1 Effective Strengths of Major European Armies 1650–1790

Year	France	Spain	Austria	Prussia	Other German states	Denmark-Norway	Sweden-Finland	Poland-Lithuania	Savoy-Piedmont	Dutch Republic	Britain
1650	125 000	100 000	33 000	800	15 000	—	50 000	10 400	18 000	30 000	70 000
1660	50 000	77 000	30 000	12 000	20 000	25 000	70 000	40 000	5 400	—	16 000
1667	85 000	30 000	60 000	14 000	58 000	25 000	—	—	—	70 000	15 000
1670/72	76 000	—	60 000	25 700	60 000	39 600	—	—	26 200	37 000	10 000
1675/78	253 000	70 000	60 000	45 300	120 000	44 000	63 000	66 000	6 000	70 000	15 000
1682/83	130 000	—	60 000	25 000	87 000	54 000	—	18 000	7 500	50 000	6 000
1688/90	273 000	30 000	70 000	29 000	80 000	32 000	65 000	38 000	8 670	50 000	43 000
1695/97	340 000	51 000	95 000	31 000	150 000	36 000	90 000	38 000	23 000	63 000	68 700
1702/05	220 500	20 000	100 000	40 600	170 000	32 000	110 000	35 000	26 550	74 500	71 400
1710	255 000	50 000	120 000	43 800	170 000	74 000	38 800	12 000	22 400	76 800	75 000
1714	150 000	—	130 000	46 000	120 000	74 000	50 000	20 000	22 500	—	16 400
1730	205 000	—	130 000	66 900	85 000	56 000	—	20 000	24 000	—	23 800
1735	309 400	—	200 000	76 000	150 000	56 000	—	20 000	43 000	—	34 400
1740	201 000	67 000	108 000	77 000	115 000	50 000	15 000	20 000	28 300	30 000	40 800
1745	345 000	—	200 000	135 000	150 000	50 000	—	20 000	55 000	90 000	53 100
1756	290 000	—	156 000	137 000	120 000	70 000	—	16 800	—	—	47 500
1760/61	347 000	59 000	201 000	130 000	165 000	70 000	47 000	20 000	—	36 000	99 000
1770	160 000	30 000	151 000	160 000	110 000	60 000	53 000	20 000	35 000	30 000	31 000
1789/90	136 000	85 000	314 800	195 000	105 000	74 000	47 000	20 000	24 000	36 000	38 600

*Note*

The table includes field and garrison troops but excludes militia-men and any colonial forces. Note that a sizeable proportion of most German (including Prussian after 1714) and Scandinavian establishments were given extended leave in peacetime. Regiments recruited outside the country but forming a permanent, integral element of the army are included, but foreign auxiliaries and subsidised allies, such as those hired by the British and Dutch, are excluded. Details for minor powers omitted from the table are patchy, but are as follows: (a) *Portugal*: official strength averaged 30 000 throughout the period, but only half were normally effective; (b) *Venice*: land forces averaged over 20 000 in 1650–1718 but many of these were foreign auxiliaries. Thereafter they declined to 6000; (c) *Naples-Sicily*: became an independent state after 1735, but most of its troops continued to be paid by Spain until 1748. Effective strength was around 25 000; (d) *Papal States*: apart from the brief war against Austria in 1708, strength rarely exceeded 5000.

However, the Dutch reformed their land and naval forces without abandoning their republican government.<sup>14</sup>

These developments were given an additional impetus in central Europe by the resumption of the Turkish threat. Already in 1681–82, the Austrians had taken the then rare step of augmenting their army in peacetime. The Turkish siege of their capital was repulsed by a truly international effort which included a large force of Poles, still organised essentially as they had been in the sixteenth century. The Polish contribution to the Christian victory on the Kahlenberg hill outside Vienna was considerable, but the refusal of their nobility to concede royal demands for war taxes prevented reform of the still largely decentralised system of defence. The crown's inability to integrate the various aristocratic contingents into its own, small royal army, was compounded by the structure of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth, with its high degree of political autonomy for powerful magnates and their right of armed resistance. Poland was already at a disadvantage by the 1690s as both Russia and Austria moved to exploit the decline of Turkish power. The next decade saw the transformation of this once powerful state to a battlefield of foreign ambitions during the Great Northern War (1700–21). Subsequent external interference, particularly from Russia, prevented military reform and deprived the commonwealth of the means to prevent the three 'partitions' (1772, 1793, 1795) by which it was removed from the map.<sup>15</sup>

The contrast with Austria and the German states could not be greater. Here, the combined French and Turkish threats resulted in almost continuous two-front warfare during the period 1683–1718, forcing the pace of German militarisation and legitimising the princes' demands for greater power at the expense of traditional representative institutions. Nonetheless, few of the German territories other than Austria and Brandenburg-Prussia had sufficient resources for an independent military role, a fact which compelled them to collaborate within the collective framework provided by the Holy Roman Empire. Even the Habsburgs and the Prussian Hohenzollern dynasties relied on the Empire's medieval constitution to sustain their authority and enhance their security. These political factors influenced the reform of collective defence, completed in 1681–82, primarily to halt French encroachments in the West, but soon utilised during the



mobilisation against the Turks in 1683. The reform sacrificed the potential military advantage of a single German army for the sake of preserving the political compromise between the princes and the Habsburgs which underpinned the Empire's traditional structure. The decision confirmed that, in practice, the princes, not the Empire, created the German standing armies. Consolidated in the larger territories like Bavaria, Saxony, Hanover and Hessen-Kassel in the 1680s, these were used to defend German princely absolutism, particularly in the international context, by serving as auxiliaries for the English, Dutch and French, as well as the Habsburgs, in return for cash subsidies and political concessions.<sup>16</sup>

The military expansion which had accompanied the prolonged warfare since 1667 came to an end with the peace settlements of 1713–21. The major powers were not only exhausted financially, but the growth of their armed forces had in many cases outpaced their organisational capacity. Despite fielding powerful forces in later eighteenth-century wars, France never exceeded the maximum reached during the 1690s, while both the Swedish and Dutch establishments declined considerably. Apart from Russia, only Austria and Prussia continued to expand their armies, particularly as their political rivalry escalated into armed conflict after 1740. Their expansion was facilitated by a combination of internal administrative reform and greater resources, as both states acquired further territory at their neighbours' expense.

These general developments were also marked by a growing trend towards standardisation, as armies not only adopted a more formal and permanent internal organisation, but these structures became increasingly uniform across the continent. There was already a pronounced tendency by the 1650s for weaker states to orientate their organisation, tactical doctrine and even uniforms around those of the predominant regional power, especially if there was a religious affinity between their rulers and populations. Protestant Sweden and the Dutch Republic were the early influences on Britain and the north German territories, especially Brandenburg, while Catholic Austria provided a model for those of the south. The military legacy of Catholic Spain was still present amongst the Italian territories which had retained their independence, but was giving way to French and later also Austrian influence. Emulation of French practices grew with

Louis XIV's victories and political influence, and Spain reorganised its forces with French assistance after 1700. However, the expulsion of the dissenting Huguenot minority in 1685 also spread French ideas to Protestant powers, especially Brandenburg, and several states like Savoy–Piedmont and the Dutch Republic had separate regiments of refugees for a time. This pattern remained essentially in place until Frederick the Great's victories over first Austria in the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–48), and then also France in the Seven Years War (1756–63), made Prussia a continent-wide model. The employment of German officers, particularly by Russia, but also the American colonists in the 1770s, helped spread Prussian influence further beyond central and western Europe.

Given these developments, it is possible to discuss the detail of military organisation in terms generally applicable throughout the continent. The core element of all European armies was the company, the smallest formal unit and the basic building-block for all larger formations. The company was originally the body of men recruited by a mercenary captain, either under subcontract for a more powerful military enterpriser (or colonel), or acting directly on the orders of a prince or state government. Captains retained considerable autonomy in many countries until well into the eighteenth century in the recruitment, administration and economy of their company which could be transferred, in return for payment, to another individual. This practice, as well as the general internal administration of all military units, was subject to growing central supervision and control from the 1650s, but the extent to which captains had lost their autonomy varied considerably, even in the late eighteenth century. In many cases, particularly Austria, Britain and France, control of the captains passed, not to the state, but to the colonel commanding the regiment into which the companies were grouped.<sup>17</sup>

Later writers, particularly liberals and military men, castigated this system of privilege and commercial entrepreneurship as corrupt and detrimental to military and national efficiency. Though it was open to abuse, not least the defrauding of the state exchequer by the company commanders, it was nonetheless representative of the nature of the old regime, incorporating both its social inequality, but also the contractual nature of most economic relations. Not only did the captain enter into a contract

with the crown or republic which employed him, but the soldier signed a similar agreement with his company commander, often specifying a fixed period of service, along with rights and duties on both sides. Even where the state resorted to limited forms of conscription, such as drafting men from militia rolls into regular formations, it often paid recruits a small bounty and promised them a discharge at the end of hostilities. In contrast to the general trend of the European economy, which moved gradually to more open forms of market capitalism, soldiers' service relations changed from economic to extra-economic coercion. Poverty and under-employment drove men to volunteer, or marked them as potential conscripts for the mercantilist-minded state before 1789, whereas the ideal of universal conscription propounded by the French Revolution ignored economic forces and compelled, at least nominally, all to serve.

Company size could vary considerably. The average in the mid-seventeenth century was still about 200 men for the infantry, but numbers were already declining by the 1670s, while France, England, and later, Spain, soon preferred much smaller units of 40 to 70 soldiers. The reduction in size reflected both contemporary tactical doctrine and the nature of old-regime armies. As greater emphasis was placed on precision and control of infantry firepower, the ratio of officers to men had to be altered in favour of the former. Meanwhile, the perennial problems of war finance forced most states to reduce their establishments, whenever possible, discharging large numbers of privates and retaining a core of experienced officers and men as a cadre to be filled out again when needed. By the early eighteenth century the European standard was about a hundred men per company, including the captain and two to three junior officers, around ten NCOs, a company surgeon and a couple of musicians. Only those states like Prussia and Austria which came to rely heavily on conscription continued to favour larger formations. Companies were grouped for tactical and administration purposes into regiments which also maintained their own small staff of senior officers, clerks, and often a musical band. Regiments varied considerably in size, with up to as many as twenty companies in elite guard formations. The battalion emerged by 1700 as an intermediate level of organisation, sometimes identical with the regiment, but often acting as a convenient smaller grouping of five to ten companies.

The company also formed the basic unit of cavalry organization, but was generally smaller, numbering only 30 to 100 men, so that horse regiments rarely totalled over 800 men, while those of foot could number 2500. The cavalry formed between one-sixth and a quarter of total strength, but weaker and poorer armies often kept most of their horse regiments dismounted in peacetime as an economy measure. This compounded the difficulties of cavalry training, already problematic, as most were scattered in rural billets where their horses had access to fodder, whereas infantry were usually quartered in company-sized detachments in major towns and fortresses. These problems contributed to the relatively slow mobilisation of most armies, already delayed by the need to incorporate untrained new recruits and to hire or purchase transport animals.

Perhaps the greatest area of change was in the artillery, which was completing the transition from its medieval, guild-like structure to become a fully professional, permanent element in all armies. The artillery encompassed a wide range of technical expertise, from the manufacture and repair of equipment and its storage, to its use in field and position (siege) warfare, in addition to associated engineering tasks, including the design and construction of temporary and permanent fortifications, bridging work, sapping and mining. Few armies had given these tasks formal organisational structure before 1650, instead distributing artillerymen amongst their key fortresses, and relying on additional expertise hired from the civilian economy when needed. The French military reforms, together with the prolonged warfare of the later seventeenth century, encouraged the evolution of distinct branches, creating separate units of field and garrison artillery, engineering, pontooner, sapper and mining corps, as well as logistical support and transport units. Though still poorly regarded socially, all were recognised as vital to any military organisation and were often at the forefront of the technical and professional training of officers.

#### INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT

These armies waged the great struggles for European political predominance which decided the nature of the post-Westphalian states system, as well as access to economic and colonial wealth.

Older notions of universalism, based on the combined spiritual and secular overlordship of the Pope and Holy Roman Emperor, had been undermined by the religious schism and wars of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Dutch and Swiss independence were recognised internationally in 1648, joined 20 years later by the Portuguese, who overthrew nearly nine decades of Spanish rule to regain a separate existence as a minor world power. Rivalry between France and the Spanish and Austrian Habsburgs continued, but now concentrated on pre-eminence within a hierarchy of sovereign states. Lesser powers fought to preserve their position as full members of this new European order, as well as for regional predominance.

The struggle for state sovereignty indicates the primarily dynastic nature of international conflict, since sovereignty was largely defined by kingship and personal rule. Even in the republican regimes of Venice, Genoa and the Dutch, political power was displayed through a court and hereditary nobility, alongside narrow representative assemblies. Similarly, the crown and royal and imperial titles of Polish king and Holy Roman Emperor symbolised the sovereignty of both these political commonwealths, despite the absence of hereditary royal rule. Position in the new international order was still associated with the prestige and status of the monarch, alongside his or her ability to enforce claims to disputed territory, which also derived primarily from dynastic inheritance rights.<sup>18</sup>

The role of territory, however, raises the question of whether material concerns, or even an underlying mode of production, somehow structurally determined the causes and nature of European wars.<sup>19</sup> Certainly, the primary objective of any conflict was the control of territory, and the capture and retention of strategic towns was the main measure of military success. The imposition of a particular religion on an opposing population which had formed an important goal before 1648 largely disappeared, though confessional affinity continued to influence international alliances into the early eighteenth century. Moreover, no major war was possible without the labour of millions of ordinary Europeans, most of whom were peasants with no formal political power. The geopolitical shifts of the period confirmed that territory, population and taxable wealth were vital to political prestige and military success. Small states like Venice, Sweden

and the Dutch Republic, all once significant powers, were marginalised after 1648, while those like Brandenburg–Prussia and Savoy–Piedmont, poorly endowed with indigenous resources, had to resort to extreme measures to keep pace with their larger neighbours. The diffusion of enlightened philosophy, as well as mechanistic theories of the balance of international power, encouraged statesmen to see the world in more rational, material terms. Yet wars were never exclusively about material wealth, be it for personal or public gain. The use of dynastic claims and royal rights went beyond legitimising conflicts in the eyes of Europe's political elite, to form the core of why they went to war. Prestige and honour represented their 'symbolic capital', something which gave meaning to their lives and was as tangible to them as any material concern.

The presence of these factors, together with the socially exclusive world within which decisions were taken, should not, however, lead us to the common conclusion that war in this period was simply the 'sport of kings'; a sort of seasonal variation on hunting intended to give the nobility something to do. Monarchical rule did allow the foibles of a few privileged individuals to exercise great influence on events, and the decisions of headstrong kings, like Charles XII of Sweden, could plunge entire populations into disastrous conflicts. Nonetheless, few could go to war on a whim, as a host of practical and ideological constraints limited their freedom of action. Not only were the mechanisms of resource mobilisation cumbersome and inefficient, but peace, not war, was absolutism's chief goal. Its claim to supreme political power rested on its relative ability to preserve domestic tranquillity after decades of civil and religious strife. War, or even the costly preparation for it, threatened to disturb this delicate internal equilibrium and so could not be trifled with. This, in turn, explains the delays which accompanied the outbreak of hostilities and characterised most campaigns. Old-regime armies were no less capable of operating in winter than those of Gustavus Adolphus or Napoleon, but generally preferred not to in order to ease the logistical and financial burden, and to allow time to find a suitable peace with honour.

The exceptions to this appear to be the Anglo-Dutch wars of the later seventeenth century and the protracted struggle of the northern powers to control the Baltic, where geography helped

concentrate wealth at obvious strategic points, such as the Sound and the mouths of major rivers. Powerful interest groups were associated with trade in these areas, as well as oceanic commerce with the colonies, and there is evidence that some agitated for war to secure further economic advantages. English entrepreneurs, for instance, supported the republican Commonwealth's war against the Dutch in 1652–54, championing the mercantilist association of wealth with military power and the belief that force was necessary to acquire a greater share of world markets. However, the huge cost of the conflict, as well as the damage to trade, changed opinions by the time of the Third Anglo-Dutch War (1672–74), when commercial circles were accusing Charles II of cynically exploiting mercantilist rhetoric to justify a conflict intended to increase royal power.<sup>20</sup>

In fact, it was the narrow fiscal advantage accruing from trade and additional territory that influenced decisions for war, and it is not surprising that the leading mercantilist politician of the age, Colbert, was in the service of Louis XIV. Fiscal concerns also drove the debate over the state's military power. Attempts by those excluded from office, including bourgeois groups, to control the state monopoly of violence were not intended to exploit this for their own ends in external wars, but to redistribute the domestic burdens of its maintenance to their advantage. In contrast to the period before 1648, these political struggles remained relatively peaceful, except in areas of historic autonomy, like Scotland, Ireland and Hungary, which a centralising state was seeking to integrate into its fiscal–military structure. War was now waged primarily between states rather than within them, assisting in the consolidation of territorial boundaries and the sharpening distinction, marked more clearly in international law and diplomatic protocol, between both war and peace and war and revolt.<sup>21</sup>

#### TACTICS AND COMBAT EXPERIENCE

All wars involve more than the relative ability of states to mobilise resources and organise armies; they also include violent confrontation on the battlefield and the individual experience of combat. In keeping with absolutism's goal of peace, along with philo-

sophical and practical reasons to conserve human life, old-regime strategy did emphasise the value of manoeuvre and deterrence to achieve political objectives. Ultimately, however, all armies prepared to fight and their tactical doctrine was intended to facilitate a decisive victory. In contrast to other periods, this did not necessarily mean the physical annihilation of the opposing forces, but simply the achievement of a clear margin of success sufficient to compel them to concede victory.

These concerns, together with the nature of contemporary military technology and the topography of the war zone, determined deployment and action on the battlefield. While commanders sought open terrain suitable for their cavalry and an effective field of fire, in practice most engagements took place near inhabited settlements, since these formed the principal objectives and were essential sources of money and sustenance. Many important battles, like Turin (1706), Belgrade (1717) or Prague (1757), were fought either to relieve or capture vital cities, and virtually every other action took its name from a village or larger settlement featuring prominently in the fighting. These settlements, along with natural features like rivers, woods and hills, were enhanced by earthworks and other field fortifications, where time permitted. German troops campaigning in the more open terrain of the Hungarian Great Plain even carried portable wooden obstacles to protect them from the Turks, whose armies always included a large proportion of cavalry.

Deployment was essentially linear, emphasising width rather than depth for both attack and defence. The 56 000-strong Franco-Bavarian army occupied a frontage of nearly 5 km at Blenheim (1704); a ratio of manpower to physical space that remained roughly constant throughout the century. The better regiments were generally placed in the front line, with a second formed up about 300 paces<sup>22</sup> behind, a distance sufficiently close to permit effective support, yet far enough to prevent the accidental discharge of musketry killing those in the first line. The intervals between the second line units were generally double those in the first, and often greater, if the army was numerically inferior to its opponent.

Reserves were rare, partly because of the difficulties in ensuring they could reach the areas where they were needed. Indeed, the problems of command and control, often exacerbated by

personal jealousies amongst the generals, proved the greatest inhibitor of tactical innovation and a major cause of battlefield defeat. These difficulties extended to the level of unit deployment and influenced the way commanders sought to use or avoid different types of terrain. Contrary to some later assumptions, linear formations were not overly rigid and could operate in broken or wooded country. The battles of Friedlingen (1702) and Lobositz (1756), to cite just two examples, both involved assaults by lines of infantry up tree-covered slopes against enemy positions. The fact that such action was generally avoided was not due to any fear that, once out of the sight of their officers, soldiers would desert.<sup>23</sup> All orders had to be communicated by oral and visual signals, which, in an age of black powder, had only a limited range and were open to misinterpretation. Moreover, the break-up of tight formations threatened unit cohesion and left individual soldiers vulnerable, particularly as their weapons were ill-suited for individual combat.

These factors limited the size of tactical units to about 150 cavalry or 500 infantry, designated squadrons and battalions respectively. The administrative organisation of regiments into companies was generally dissolved for tactical purposes, with those of the cavalry being combined into squadrons, while their infantry counterparts were broken up into fire squads called platoons or divisions. The grouping of regiments into brigades was for convenience of command only and generally had little permanence until some late eighteenth-century experiments in France and the German states.

As the emphasis on firepower grew in the late seventeenth century, the lines became more extended, reducing the number of ranks for the infantry from five or six to three or four by the 1740s; the Prussians' use of two rank lines in the Seven Years War was forced on them by lack of manpower rather than tactical advantage. Regulations varied considerably in detail, but most allowed no more than 50cm frontage per man and only twice or three times that space between the ranks. The difficulty of maintaining such tight formations reduced their rate of movement to a maximum of 75 to 80 paces per minute.<sup>24</sup>

Both deployment and training were intended to maximize firepower, though individual regulations differed as to how this should be achieved. Most armies continued to use some form of

firing by ranks by which an entire row of infantrymen discharged their pieces while the others levelled or reloaded. Firing by platoons involved individual sections of the line firing in turn, with the intention that at least one squad would be firing at any one moment. There is some debate as to which country invented this system, but it was certainly in use by the Dutch in the late seventeenth century and by Britain and Brandenburg soon after. Its principle advantage over firing by ranks was less the continuous musketry it was supposed to deliver, than the greater control exercised over the smaller platoons.

Even platoon fire was difficult to sustain under battlefield conditions. Significantly, the primary example of its successful delivery took place at the battle of Mollwitz (1741), where a Prussian army with years of drill but no battlefield experience met a smaller Austrian force which included a large number of untried recruits. Generally, musketry broke down into each man firing as soon as he had reloaded, making it difficult for the officers to direct it or even bring it to an end. Technical factors contributed to this. Late seventeenth-century muskets were still comparatively crude, and even the introduction of the flintlock and, later, the iron ramrod, did little to improve accuracy. Accordingly, drill emphasised the overall volume of fire, training men to deliver up to five shots per minute under ideal conditions. The switch to aimed fire was not encouraged until the 1790s, when further technical improvement made this a more realistic objective.

Close-range musketry could be deadly, as illustrated by one short exchange at Malplaquet (1709), where an Irish regiment in the English army killed one opponent for every 15 shots at 100 paces. However, most theorists reckoned the more usual rate was only one casualty for every 250 to 400 shots discharged; a factor less to do with technical limitations than the problems of fire control.<sup>25</sup> Few armies had the discipline to wait until their opponents came within the effective range of 160 paces, usually opening fire at 300 paces, or, as often proved the case in the Seven Years War, at the totally ineffective distance of 800 paces. Advancing units generally halted just within effective range, returning fire whether their officers ordered it or not. It was rare for an attack to converge to only 50 paces before the morale of one or other side gave way and precipitated a retreat. Despite

periodic emphasis on battle-winning bayonet attacks in official regulations, hand-to-hand fighting generally occurred only in pursuit of fleeing opponents, or the assault of buildings or other fixed positions.

The cavalry's tactical role was more varied and reflected by the division of that arm into distinct types, each characterised by different training, equipment and style of uniform. Heavy cavalry, or cuirassiers, often still wearing metal breastplates and skullcaps, were trained as shock troops intended to defeat mounted opponents and charge disordered or fleeing infantry. Dragoons were usually given similar tasks, but were still trained and even deployed as mounted infantry, as at Guastella (1734), where three French regiments fought on foot in support of an infantry attack. A third type of horseman emerged by the early eighteenth century, often modelled directly on the Hungarian hussars who had served in the Habsburg forces for over a century. These were used for scouting prior to a battle, as well as for harassing the flanks of the enemy army.

All cavalry tactics were reliant on the physical attributes of horsepower. This made mounted units more mobile than the infantry, capable of covering 300 paces per minute at a trot, and up to 500 at full gallop. The sight and sound of a cavalry unit moving at speed had a considerable impact on morale, and, indeed, those who advocated the superiority of shock tactics relied in part on this being sufficient to break an opposing force. However, horses presented a large target to enemy musketry and artillery fire and were easily exhausted, particularly as they were often loaded with more than 100 kg of saddle and equipment. Cavalry generally had to rest after half an hour's movement at a trot, and the fact that the average life of a Prussian cuirassier horse was only four and a half years indicates the harsh realities of their existence.<sup>26</sup>

The use of artillery changed considerably across the timespan, reflecting both technical developments and organizational changes. The 12-pounder became the standard battle piece and had a maximum range of at least 2 km, but was effective generally only up to 680 m. Most armies attached smaller, so-called battalion guns to their infantry which had an effective range of about 500 m. These weapons generally fired solid roundshot at distant

targets, switching at closer range to canister shot, a loose package of smaller projectiles which spread upon discharge, turning the piece into a murderous larger version of a shotgun. Explosive projectiles became more common from the 1650s, but were limited to specialist weapons like howitzers, used for lobbing shells over intervening obstacles and fortifications.

The mobility of artillery had improved considerably since the early sixteenth century as the use of different metals and lighter-weight gun carriages became more common. Horse-drawn cannon could cover about 300 paces a minute, about twice as fast as when manhandled, but even the latter rate compares favourably to the slow pace of infantry in formation. Artillery fire was most deadly when concentrated against stationary targets and when uninhibited by either smoke or physical obstacles. The practice of distributing cannon amongst the infantry reduced effectiveness, but this was compensated by a steady increase in the numbers of guns each army deployed, particularly from the 1750s. Austrian mobilisation plans in 1768 envisaged a ratio of one cannon for every 229 men of total strength, representing an increase of nearly 400 per cent on the average at the beginning of the century. Additional cannon contributed to the already difficult logistical problems by requiring further horse teams and transport vehicles. Considering that there were generally as many baggage and artillery horses as there were soldiers in any field army, these factors help explain the limited operational radius of most forces and their difficulties in operating outside the spring and summer months.

While the standard picture of two opposing lines closing on each other holds true in the basic pattern of most battles, there were numerous variations, especially due to different terrain and the presence of field fortifications. Most commanders were more imaginative than often supposed and sought, either by initial deployment or prior manoeuvring, to gain an advantage over their opponents. A famous example is the Prussian oblique order developed by Frederick the Great, where the bulk of the army was concentrated on one wing to make a decisive attack. However, this rarely worked in practice and in any case relied heavily on pre-battle manoeuvring rather than actual deployment for success.

Nonetheless, the French and Austrians, as well as the Prussians, developed new tactics from the 1740s, collectively forming the precursors of revolutionary and Napoleonic warfare. All three used converging columns of four or five short lines of units arranged in depth, for concentrated attacks against chosen points, most notably by the Austrians at Hochkirch (1758), but also by the Prussians at Freiberg (1762), and on several occasions by French generals. The latter also experimented with columns at the lesser tactical level of unit formation, while the Prussians developed faster horse-drawn artillery for rapid deployment. Austria's wars against both conventional European armies in the West as well as the Turks in the East also encouraged innovation, as did English, French and German experience in colonial conflicts, particularly the American War of Independence (1776–83). These innovations were not, however, fully developed or combined with the new ruthlessness and forms of organisation necessary to transform European warfare until after 1789.

Most engagements were not great battles, but minor skirmishes in the constant war of outposts and reconnaissance that accompanied all old-regime campaigns. Formal sieges were also important, particularly in the more highly urbanised and fortified regions of northern Italy and the Low Countries. Technical factors tended to induce considerable similarities in the course of sieges which involved the slow advance of protective trenches towards the fortified position and the reduction of the latter by cannon fire or mining.<sup>27</sup> The need to garrison important towns greatly reduced available field forces and, thus, also the likelihood of major engagements. The system of garrisons was often extended to include small detachments in villages, or along long lines of earthworks. This tendency seems to have become more pronounced, particularly in the last wars of the eighteenth century; the War of the Bavarian Succession (1778–79) between Austria and Prussia, and the Austro-Russian attack on Turkey (1787–92). In the latter, the Austrians deployed along a 1350-km line in 1787, probably the first use of such an extensive continuous front in military history. This strategy, sometimes known as cordon defence, inhibited troop concentrations and certainly contributed to the fragility of old-regime armies against the revolutionary French, who grouped their forces for specific attacks.

## THE LEGACY OF THE OLD REGIME

The period 1648–1789 witnessed important developments in European warfare. The first of these was structural, and involved the decisive shift to the state monopoly of violence and the consolidation of its apparatus in permanent land and sea forces, along with the bureaucratic infrastructure necessary to sustain them. This changed both the nature of the army and of war itself. International and civil conflict became more distinct, with the latter also becoming less prevalent. The army now faced outwards against external dangers, while internal threats to the status quo were met by a variety of more peaceful diversionary tactics, most not fully developed until the mid-nineteenth century. War became more exclusively an instrument of state policy, though this was still frequently defined in dynastic terms. Political debate focused on the distribution of the burdens of defence, something which could provoke radical criticism of the entire social order, as in France by 1789.

Armies, meanwhile, became more professional and took on an internal organisation and forms of behaviour that were to characterise their structure well beyond 1789. Tactical innovations were slowly transforming the experience of combat and the conduct of war. This remained limited more by moral and practical restraints on violence than by lack of political objectives. The events following 1789 would indeed bring profound change, but they would also leave much substantially unaltered.