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Of ‘Master’ and ‘Grand Narratives’ and Their Discontents: Early Modern European Military History

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This article offers a short, critical survey of the ‘grand’ or ‘master’ narratives produced since the 1950s by those discussing the history of war in early modern Europe. It examines in turn the War and Society approach, the concept of a Military Revolution, narratives linking political and social impacts, the more recent models of Fiscal Military and Contractor States, and the debates around the nature of military change. It concludes that grand narratives are always flawed, but we need them to relate or compare what would otherwise be a bewildering array of disconnected stories.

KEYWORDS War and society; narratives; historiography; early modern Europe; postmodernism

The historiography of early modern European warfare has supplied two of the most influential approaches to studying conflict more generally. One of these gives this journal its title, war and society, and emerged in the 1960s as an attempt to connect traditional military history to the then dominant social and economic themes within European historiography. The second is the concept of a ‘military revolution’ which appeared just a few years earlier and remains as influential, if more contested, today. These two approaches provide the starting point for this short survey of how long-term trends in early modern European warfare have been discussed.

Whereas war and society is primarily an approach resting on a set of assumptions and choices of sources, the military revolution is more explicitly an overarching explanation for longer term change. This contrast is useful in helping to define what we might mean by a ‘master narrative’. That term is, of course, immediately problematic. The word ‘master’ has both masculine associations and contains an implicit assertion of authority which also bedevils the alternative label ‘grand narrative’. While at least gender neutral, the frequent linkage of ‘grand’ with ‘sweeping’ conveys a similar (if often unjustified) sense that those

employing these terms and their associated approaches are dismissive towards others and seek (possibly deliberately) to silence or smother subaltern voices. To their critics, these approaches weaponise the past to continue imperialistic or patriarchal domination.

It might also be objected that master or grand narratives frequently appear indifferent to the messy details and endless exceptions with which history confronts us. Such a charge alerts us to the dangers lurking within narrative approaches which have been exposed and endlessly picked over since the linguistic and cultural 'turns' which formed part of the postmodernism of the 1980s–90s. Those decades saw the 'return to narrative' after the more structural and openly theoretical approaches of the mid-twentieth century, but simultaneously the fragmentation of those narratives through the postmodern challenge, the broad thrust of which questioned historians' traditional claims to objectivity and instead asserted that history was essentially another branch of literature.¹ Beleaguered and often reluctant to face such criticisms, some historians abandoned attempts to tell 'big' stories and withdrew to smaller scale 'micro history' focusing on singular events or even individuals. The simultaneous injection of ideas from other disciplines, notably the anthropological approach of 'thick description' from which many postmodernists also drew inspiration, made this shift to micro history appear less defeatist by providing it with some solid intellectual foundations.

Military history's heavy reliance on conventional narratives has left it particularly vulnerable to such criticisms, compounding other ethical or ideological objections to its right to be pursued at all. Much of the historiography of war has been framed around the (largely male) groups which have engaged in conflict and who appear as the principal protagonists in the narratives, either individually as 'great captains' and other leaders, or collectively through the histories of units or particular armed forces. The same protagonists also dominate histories of individual battles or campaigns, as well as those of entire wars.

These studies are generally constructed chronologically and follow a common template examining origins, recounting events in sequence, and assessing outcomes in terms of success or failure, generally measured against some implicit yardstick. They acquire their narrative drive and explanatory power from their close sequential linkage of cause and effect of 'one thing leading to another'. This suits their authors' often didactic intentions, especially in the case of official regimental and staff histories written to educate and inspire officers. Context is never ignored but is often reduced to immediate circumstances such as the number and quality of the available forces and the nature of the terrain, rather than longer-term, more impersonal developments, like the emergence of specific political structures or economic trends. Consequently, human agency is foregrounded with a close discussion of decision-making processes usually assessed according to whether the author feels the protagonists made the 'right' choices in the given circumstances.

Postmodernism spent several decades 'deconstructing' texts and images to expose how they were composed, thereby transcending the conventional

¹ A useful summary with further references is Jan de Vries, *The return from the return to narrative* (Max Weber Lecture, San Domenico di Fiesole: European University Institute, 2013).

discussion of whether authors had correctly interpreted their sources to argue such an exercise was inherently impossible.² By the 2000s, there were signs that this nihilist critique was beginning to eat itself, offering little to replace what it was busy destroying. It proved far easier for those writing popular military history to carry on regardless, however, than for those employed at universities, in professional military education, or at other public institutions. The deepening 'cultural wars', fuelled by the postmodernist critique, ensured that historians were as much a part of the story as their ostensible subject matter and could no longer hide behind their sandbags of footnotes, claiming to be objectively neutral. The much publicised 'crisis in military history' – something which seems to have been an almost permanent state across the past forty years – stems partly from an inability to respond positively and effectively to these challenges, as well as the refusal of many critics to recognise the contributions and potential of the history of war.³

War and society

Central to those contributions has been the approach of 'war and society'. This is best exemplified by one of its earliest pioneers, André Corvisier (1918–2014), whose works concentrated on the armies and wars of Louis XIV's France, but whose influence ranged far wider in time and space. Corvisier's approach was characterised by his innovative use of military records, notably those of Les Invalides, begun in 1670 as a home for elderly and disabled veterans and which became the centrepiece of the French system of military welfare. Corvisier used the veterans' service records to provide the first comprehensive survey of the social structure of an early modern European army, providing a model which many have followed.⁴ The publication of an English translation of his broader social history of early modern European armies in 1976 proved hugely influential and the approach was extended into modern history with the five-volume series overseen by Geoffrey Best (1928–2018) and published by Fontana 1982–8, of which John Hale's study of Renaissance warfare remains a stand-out contribution.⁵

Corvisier situated his findings within France's broader socio-economic development which, in turn, was being steadily rewritten by the historians of the *Annales*

² Alan Munslow, *Deconstructing history* (London: Routledge, 1997).

³ Already in 1981 military history was declared to be in crisis as it could not match the innovations provided by sociology and psychology in the study of conflict: Walter Emil Kaegi Jr., 'The crisis in military historiography', *Armed Forces and Society* 7 (1981), 299–316.

⁴ André Corvisier, *L'armée française de la fin du xvii^e siècle au ministère de Choiseul: Le soldat* (2 vol., Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964).

⁵ André Corvisier, *Armies and societies in Europe 1494–1789* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976); J.R. Hale, *War and society in Renaissance Europe, 1450–1620* (London: Fontana Press, 1985; rev. ed., 1998). The others in the series were: M.S. Anderson, *War and society in Europe of the Old Regime, 1618–1789* (London: Fontana, 1988); Geoffrey Best, *War and society in revolutionary Europe, 1770–1870* (London, 1982); V.G. Kiernan, *European empires from conquest to collapse, 1815–1960* (London: Fontana, 1982); Brian Bond, *War and society in Europe, 1870–1970* (London: Fontana, 1983).

School, like Fernand Braudel (1902–85), which emphasised the power of impersonal structural forces over human agency in determining historical change across the *longue durée*. While the Annalists were often overtly theoretical, those adopting the war and society approach have rarely been explicitly so. The deep empirical grounding characterising Corvisier and many others distinguishes them from the contemporaneous sociological and political science approaches to military questions. The latter are exemplified by Morris Janowitz (1919–88), Edward Shils (1910–95), Amos Perlmutter (1932–2001), Samuel P. Huntington (1927–2008), and Edward Luttwak (b.1942) whose hugely influential work intersected with war and society themes by examining motivation and military-civil relations but focused primarily on more recent history.

Military revolutions

Regardless of source base, both these schools approach the history of war through a social lens, broadly arguing that armed forces reflect the societies they serve. While not necessarily disputing that conclusion, the concept of a military revolution locates change firmly within the military sphere. First articulated in 1955 by Michael Roberts (1908–96), this idea derives its influence through its explanation of causation. In Roberts' initial version, new thinking about warfare in the later sixteenth century enabled commanders to make more efficient use of gunpowder weaponry. Geoffrey Parker (b.1943) modified this, bringing the start date back to about 1500 and arguing that technological change – notably fortress design – proved the trigger. Both nonetheless agreed that enhanced military effectiveness fuelled an increase in the scale and scope of warfare, in turn impacting on state and society.⁶ Parker added a global dimension in his book-length treatment of the topic which first appeared in 1988 and was subtitled *Military innovation and the rise of the West 1500–1800*. This argued that the possession of gunpowder technology and disciplined, close-order tactics gave Europeans significant advantages and assisted in their acquisition of colonial empires, while equally, non-Europeans adopted similar forms of organisation when dealing with the same military technology.

This global dimension has attracted the greatest attention and criticism, not least through the interweaving of the analysis of European military change with the debates emanating from economic history around 2000 about the 'Great Divergence' between China and the West in world history.⁷ Much of the criticism

⁶ For a useful compilation of the initial contributions and criticisms: Clifford J. Rogers (ed.), *The military revolution debate: Readings on the military transformation of early modern Europe* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

⁷ Tonio Andrade, *The gunpowder age: China, military innovation and the rise of the West in world history* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Tonio Andrade, Hyeok Hweon Kang and Kirsten Cooper, 'A Korean Military Revolution? Parallel military innovations in East Asia and Europe', *Journal of World History*, 25 no. 1 (2014), 51–84; Peter Allan Lorge, *The Asian Military Revolution: From gunpowder to the bomb* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jeremy Black, *Beyond the military revolution: War in the seventeenth-century world* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). For a superb overview of the debates in economic history: Patrick Karl O'Brien, *The economies of Imperial China and Western Europe: Debating the Great Divergence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

overlapped with that levelled at the idea of a military revolution in early modern Europe, notably whether the term ‘revolution’ could be applied to a phenomenon allegedly lasting three centuries, as well as the claims that change was driven by technological innovation. More specifically, those discussing the concept from a non-European perspective argued that any European comparative military advantage was often fleeting, while ideas and practices associated with Europeans could also often be found elsewhere in the world.

Within European history, some important criticisms were made about how the military revolution explained change. Jeremy Black turned the original concept on its head, arguing that it took the emergence of more potent and stable states after 1660 for the scale of warfare to increase.⁸ His questioning of the emphasis placed on technological innovation was echoed by Clifford Rogers’ alternative idea of a ‘punctuated equilibrium’ combining long periods of incremental change with shorter, disruptive ‘revolutionary’ moments of more fundamental change.⁹ While originating in the study of European warfare, these discussions made their fullest impact through the idea of multiple Revolutions in Military Affairs (RMA) which emerged in the later 1990s through efforts by the US and other Western militaries to gain and maintain a comparative advantage over their likely opponents.¹⁰

States and societies

There is not the space to explore the full ramifications of these discussions here, but they have intersected with debates on European political development. State-centred narratives are common in the history of other parts of the world but have been particularly pronounced for European history given the longevity of the continent’s division into warring polities, as well as the close linkage of political and military power. Taking their cue from Max Weber’s famous definition of the state as ‘the monopoly of legitimate violence’, historians have frequently presented political development as progressive consolidation through institution-building and the taming of previously ‘independent’ military forces, such as those provided by nobles or military entrepreneurs.¹¹ These narratives remain deeply embedded in much of the historiography of early modern Europe which has tended to take Weber’s definition of the state as a teleological historical endpoint. Aspects that appear to point

⁸ Jeremy Black, *A military revolution? Military change and European society 1550–1800* (Basingstoke: Macmillan education, 1991).

⁹ Clifford J. Rogers, “Military Revolutions” and “Revolutions in Military Affairs”: A historian’s perspective’, in Thierry Gongora and Harald von Riekhoff (eds.), *Toward a Revolution in Military Affairs? Defense and security at the dawn of the 21st Century* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 21–36.

¹⁰ Colin S. Gray, *Strategy for chaos. Revolutions in military affairs and the evidence of history* (London: Frank Cass, 2002); Macgregor Knox and Williamson Murray (eds.), *The dynamics of military revolution 1300–2050* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Williamson Murray, ‘Thinking about Revolutions in Military Affairs’, *Joint Forces Quarterly* 16 (1997), 69–76.

¹¹ Hans Heinrich Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 77–128.

towards the modern, centralised national state are highlighted as important steps in that direction.

Conventional military history has remained closely aligned with this classic state-centred narrative. Both share a preference for agency over structure, presenting a change as a result of conscious decisions and well-planned reforms. Military history's penchant for tracing regimental lineages also accords with the sequential character of the state narrative. 'Standing' (permanent) armies and navies are regarded as key institutions created by early modern states, though historians still disagree where and when these emerged first.

Narratives of professionalisation are important adjuncts in these stories and usually see a progressive sequence whereby monarchical states first tamed autonomous feudal lords, subordinating them as a 'service nobility', and then opened appointments to men of talent from more humble backgrounds. Simultaneously, opportunities for perquisites and graft were progressively curtailed, while the emergent officer corps was offered a more structured career ladder complete, by the eighteenth century, with more comprehensive and better-funded retirement opportunities.

The war and society approach has contributed a wealth of useful studies which variously support or challenge this narrative, and which collectively demonstrate the fruitful connections cutting across the sub-disciplinary boundaries between the history of war and that of politics, society, economy, and culture. They also link to other influential narratives of long-term societal change. One perspective argues that change is top-down, best exemplified by the concept of 'social discipline' coined by Gerhard Oestreich (1910–78) who believed that states first disciplined their servants who in turn facilitated a broader disciplining of society during early modernity, moulding the population as more diligent, obedient subjects. Intended to boost the population's fiscal and military potential, these measures, Oestreich argued, unwittingly prepared people to become factory workers and thus made possible the Industrial Revolution.¹²

An alternative account was provided by Norbert Elias (1897–1990) who posited a looser 'civilising process' whereby change occurred as individuals adopted the norms of social elites. Over time, this internalised 'self-discipline' ultimately rendered unnecessary the kind of external social discipline described by Oestreich.¹³ Though Elias ranged more widely over time, both he and Oestreich drew primarily on early modern examples. While few would still adopt their models uncritically, their influence has been profound, and their respective positions still largely frame more recent debates on long-term trends in the form and incidence of violence.

The most interesting discussion about the state in the last three decades has centred on the relative abilities of different types of state to raise and employ resources for war with the two, largely complementary concepts of a 'fiscal

¹² Gerhard Oestreich, *Neostoicism and the early modern state* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

¹³ Norbert Elias, *The civilising process* (rev. ed., 2 vol., Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

military state' and a 'contractor state'. The former was proposed by John Brewer in 1989 who argued Britain's emergence as a great power rested on its superior ability to raise taxes with parliamentary consent after the Glorious Revolution of 1688.¹⁴ His work triggered renewed discussion on the important of representative institutions in enhancing state power, a topic which had been debated already during the later nineteenth century and again within historical sociology in the 1940s and 1990s.¹⁵

The alternative model of a contractor state emerged from research on the victualing of Britain's Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars, but the concept was swiftly taken up by early modernists and has been applied extensively to the study of much of Europe between the late fifteenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁶ Whereas studies of the fiscal military state examined revenue raising, the contractor state has explored how it was spent, arguing over whether 'outsourcing' through 'private' entrepreneurs proved more effective than state provision. While focused on the past, the emergence of this debate after 2010 coincided with growing public awareness of the exponential rise of private military and security companies (PMSCs) and fears that the modern state is being 'hollowed out' through the outsourcing of its key functions.¹⁷

From religious to limited war?

Inevitably, all large-scale narratives convey a sense of change over time. Here, the history of early modern European warfare has perhaps been the least well-served. Few grand accounts have been explicit about their choice of explanatory model, but most have adopted a stadial approach, dividing time into stages defined by

¹⁴ John Brewer, *The sinews of power: War, money and the English state 1688–1783* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989).

¹⁵ Examples include Philip T. Hoffman and Kathryn Norberg (eds.), *Fiscal Crises, Liberty and Representative Government* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Jan Glete, *War and the State in Early Modern Europe: Spain, the Dutch Republic, and Sweden as Fiscal-military States, 1500–1660* (London: Routledge, 2002); Christopher Storrs (ed.), *The fiscal-military state in eighteenth-century Europe: essays in honour of P.G.M. Dickson* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009). For the often-neglected maritime dimension: N.A.M. Rodger, 'From the "Military Revolution" to the "Fiscal-Naval State"', *Journal of Maritime Research* 13 (2011), 119–28. For earlier variants of the concept of different paths to the modern state relating to warfare: Otto Hintze, *The historical essays of Otto Hintze* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); Harold D. Lasswell, 'The garrison state', *American Journal of Sociology* 46 (1941), 455–67; Charles Tilly, *Coercion, capital and European states AD990–1992* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Lars Bo Kaspersen and Jeppe Strandsbjerg, *Does War Make States?: Investigations of Charles Tilly's Historical Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹⁶ Roger Knight and Martin Wilcox, *Sustaining the Fleet, 1793–1815: War, the British Navy and the Contractor State* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010); Richard Harding and Sergio Solbes Ferri (eds.), *The Contractor State and its Implications (1659–1815)* (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 2012); Rafael Torres Sánchez, *Military Entrepreneurs and the Spanish Contractor State in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁷ Further discussion of this within the context of early modern European history in Peter H. Wilson and Marianne B. Klerk, 'The Business of War untangled: Cities as Fiscal-Military Hubs in Europe, 1530s–1860s', *War in History* 29 (2021), 80–103, and Peter H. Wilson, 'Foreign military labour in Europe's transition to modernity', *European Review of History* 27 (2020), 12–32.

specific characteristics and marked by alleged 'turning points'. The latter feature in all grand narratives which necessarily need them as markers of defining shifts, but military history has been particularly characterised by associating time periods with major events. The direction of travel is usually (at least implicitly) that of linear progress, with each stage's military institutions inherently more advanced and effective than those before.

There is no consensus on which events to choose, but those identified as book-ending 'early modern' warfare largely align with those selected to define early modernity more broadly. There has been greater agreement over the terminus with the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars as a profound rupture ushering in a new era of conflict. Things are less clear about a start date, though most accounts choose to begin in the mid-fifteenth century. This roughly 340-year period is conventionally partitioned by the Peace of Westphalia which ended the Thirty Years War in 1648 and is widely, if inaccurately, interpreted as the 'birth' of the modern international order of sovereign national states.¹⁸

After a relatively brief period associated with the proliferation of more effective gunpowder weaponry during the late Renaissance, Europe is usually presented as entering an 'age of religious wars' lasting from the Reformation to the Westphalian settlement which supposedly secularised international relations. The two pre-1648 periods are frequently presented as related through the common prominence of 'military enterprisers' who raised and commanded 'mercenary' armies for monarchs who supposedly lacked the means to do this directly, and yet sought troops who would be more effective politically and militarily than the 'medieval' feudal levies. These factors, combined with the presence of religious animosities, are believed to have led to war escaping political control.¹⁹

Order was allegedly only restored through the establishment of 'standing' armies around the mid- to late seventeenth century. That achievement is generally credited to the 'absolute' monarchs, exemplified by France's Louis XIV. The desire for control is thought to have contributed to the period 1648–1789 being one of 'limited war' in which conflict was reduced to the 'sport of kings' who engaged in relatively bloodless manoeuvring. Warfare and armed forces supposedly became largely detached from society until the French Revolution reunited them in a new age of citizens-in-arms.

Conclusions

Very little of this conventional narrative survives the findings of more recent research, yet elements of it persist, especially in popular military history and in the historically grounded discussions of conflict within other disciplines. The discussions of change over time reveal the paradox of grand narratives. They are always flawed, but we need them to relate or compare what would otherwise be a

¹⁸ Among several important critiques of this Westphalian myth, see especially Derek Croxton, *Westphalia. The last Christian peace* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

¹⁹ The classic, and still influential statement of this chronology is Michael Howard, *War in European history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

bewildering array of disconnected stories. Linear progression narratives are not necessarily ‘wrong’, but they are more likely to be if they tell a single story. With all grand narratives, we need to allow scope for plurality and different perspectives. Micro case studies are useful, but they cannot be the only way to study the past. All the large-scale approaches and concepts discussed here have proved enormously fruitful in generating debate and in linking the history of war to the rest of the human past. We need those who are prepared to risk criticism and tell ‘big stories’.

Notes on contributor

Peter H. Wilson is the Chichele Professor of the History of War at the University of Oxford, a Fellow of All Souls College, and Principal Investigator of a research project on the ‘European Fiscal-Military System 1530–1870’ funded by the European Research Council (2018–25). His work has been translated into Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Macedonian, Polish, and Spanish. His latest book, *Iron and Blood: A Military History of the German-speaking Peoples since 1500*, will be published in October 2022.

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