

The Cost of War

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Despite their lack of enthusiasm for traditional military history, war remained an important preoccupation with historians studying the later Middle Ages and the early modern period. War provided them with some of the earliest sources of quantitative data, and these very sources became the staple for the 'new history' of the 50s and the 60s. Right from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries war accounts began to fill the archives: this break with the past, for it was very much of a break, would have lasting effects. Traditional problems related to organising the recruitment, specialisation in the professional skills of war, arms and equipment, training and supervision, as well as the choice of techniques and tactics, did not disappear as if by magic. But these problems posed themselves henceforth, or at least our sources put them forward, in terms of money as much as, or more than, in terms of men and strategy. And they highlight the financial difficulties that faced the political authorities and that were insoluble within the existing institutional framework and acceptable practices of governance.

Necessity dictates laws—the mobilisation of indispensable resources during war necessitated true political and administrative changes which the conclusion of peace, far from effacing, consolidated. It led the states to endow themselves with new devices and, in the first instance, a permanent bureaucratic infrastructure. It also compelled them willy-nilly to reorient their role and ambitions in accordance with their means and to redefine their relationship with the mass of their subjects or citizens and with the economies of their territories. War thus found itself at the centre of a new rationality.

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Nonetheless war was not an economic activity like so many others. War represented a permanent challenge to states and governments; it obliged them to break with old habits when their unsuitability became manifest and to innovate within the given constraints, involving a good deal of experimentation.

The transformation of war, from an activity the primary objective of which seemed to be the booty for those who had declared and waged it—generals and soldiers—into one in which the taking possession and the sharing of the spoils followed a stricter codification, took place only very gradually. The generals of the Revolution and the Marshals of the Empire followed the example of their predecessors during the wars of Louis XV, the Duke of Richelieu and the Marshal of Saxe, and continued to accumulate colossal fortunes from the territories conquered at least in theory. The execution of a few soldiers who were caught red-handed was not enough to stop the plundering which remained the norm. But the booty became a supplement and not the essential, a supplement which the state authorities used for regulating discipline—a new notion which ensured military efficacy and facilitated the task of raising revenue for war. But at a still deeper level we perceive a twofold realisation. Plundering is recognised as futile from an economic point of view for armies which ought to replenish themselves essentially from the inhabitants: 'My friends... if you set fire, it you make people flee, you will die of hunger,' warns Villars, addressing his troops in 1707 on the eve of his entry into Germany.¹ And above all, the realisation that war brought into opposition not civil populations but states of which soldiers were only agents. Civil property ought to be secure,² except in cases where necessity justified its requisition. This decisive change in the laws of war would give the conflicts of the nineteenth century an almost humane dimension before the ravages of the anonymous bombardments of our time.

But, in fact, this change followed another in which Europe passed from a situation where the subject people or vassals bore the major part of the financial burden—still true for the Ottoman Empire of the fifteenth century—to one which was exactly the reverse: Whatever be the size of these exceptional revenues, as those of the West Indies for early modern Spain, the burden of war was henceforth borne by the heart of the Empire. The territories which were the earliest to be subjected and the most loyal to monarchical

it was made possible only by a structural transformation of these primarily agrarian economies with a thrust towards greater monetisation with increased prices of agricultural products and labour. The transformation was slow and difficult especially because it concerned peasants who, though caught in the change, dreamed of a return to self-sufficiency. However, the transformation was irreversible and marked a veritable, though slow, revolution from within these economies. Historians who are sensitive to the inelasticity of the upper limit attained in the growth of both population and production by the middle of the fourteenth century, have tended to underline, perhaps somewhat excessively, the immobile and Malthusian character of the change in these economies.

If war played a decisive role in this transformation, it was through the mediation of the states which placed themselves in a condition of permanent competition, modifying on the one hand their administrative and constitutional machinery and on the other, the rules of the game. In the new situation if war cost more and more, the price of peace too rose spectacularly in that it was an armed peace. Each state was obliged to maintain permanent troops, fortifications, artillery, arsenals and fleet, whatever it might do to minimise cost and to rationalise maintenance. Thus, at the Arsenal of Venice one stocked unutilised hulls of battle-galleys. No state could escape these new necessities which were precipitated by an evolution of the same techniques and practices for diplomacy as for war.

Here again, the second half of the fifteenth century marks a break with the past. The French monarchy set the example by maintaining in peace time about 25,000 men in 1480–90 whereas in 1340 it did not recruit more than 40–50,000 men during war with a population which was double.³ The Italian states, used to the Condotta system, did the same, maintaining 'valiant men in times of peace as in times of war' (so it was said in Venice in 1421) organised as *lanze spezzate* and placed directly under their orders.⁴ Undoubtedly, actual war always demanded a supplementary effort but the gap appeared much less, given the peace time expenses. According to the figures published by M. Morineau,⁵ for the four major conflicts of the eighteenth century, the French monarchy was obliged to double these expenses in the Wars of Polish Succession and American Independence, to triple them for the War of Austrian Succession and to multiply them by an exceptional 3.5 times for the Seven

Years' War. And at the level of the budget, the gap appears to narrow itself further, since much of the war is fought on credit, the tax system soon proving inadequate to meet its needs.

This results in the multiplication of measures of expediency: the alienation of land, the 'sale of vassals' and the declaration of bankruptcy—which was in fact a reduction of the rate of interest unilaterally decided by the king of the Spanish monarchy in the sixteenth century, the monetary manipulations, the delay in payments of the quartiers or the *tandedes rentes** and sometimes even their total suppression, and Louis XIV's flattery of Samuel Bernard (which Saint Simon, who had witnessed the scene in Marly in 1708, described as 'that prostitution of the King'). But also, and above all, it was the progressive internationalisation of financial and banking circuits, on which belligerents from all sides depended, and the necessity of devoting part of their public revenues in the service of this debt in order to honour their obligations. This affected the way war was financed and provided the earliest example of staggering expenses devoted to the maintenance and the functioning of the military machine over a fairly long period. In 1788–89 revenues devoted to the payment of debt surpassed half the peace-time resources in England as well as in France.⁶ Thus war could be compared to an investment of which the cost and payment are prone to be adjusted to the ambitions and the means of different states.

War created inequalities between these states which cannot be accounted for simply in terms of their power or the quantity of men and money that they could mobilise but also on the basis of the differences in their military structures. Whereas the big states of northern Italy would succeed in 'domesticating their condottieri'⁷ and, apart from the exceptional success of Francesco Sforza, allowing them to consolidate at least some small principalities in the frontier regions, (Mantoue, Urbino, Ferrare), the mercenaries of the Catalane Company would take advantage of the weakness of the Byzantine state to grab the Duchy of Athens. Inversely, towards the end of the fifteenth century, war between Hungary and the Ottoman Empire counterposed two different military systems: the first aligned by-and-large on the model of the Western states, a costly army of mercenaries reinforced by a militia; the second, more traditional, relying either on permanent troops—the janissaries—

* Interest which was paid every three or four months.

or on the feudal levy of *sipahis*. Everywhere in fact the authority of the state was faced with a real challenge and its assertion of force ought not to delude us; the uniformity of the language used by authority veiled multiple inequalities in recruitment, supervision, armament, discipline, remunerations and their regularity. The tendency over the long term is the assertion by the state of its monopoly over violence or of its exclusive control over war and those who wage it. And the strongest and the richest succeed in this, though not always without difficulties or reversals. As soon as sovereign authority appeared fragile, the warlords and chiefs were quick to raise their heads and to cash in by offering their services to the highest bidder. One must wait a long time—in France, the political crisis of the mid-seventeenth century—before the die is cast.

But to the extent that military expenses absorbed the major part of their resources, the states were impelled to regulate and rationalise them, a task which was easier and, in any case, within their reach more than the reorganisation of the tax structure and collection which was likely to meet with fierce resistance and run counter to an infinity of privileges. In the long term, all developments were to work in the same direction: the disqualification of the traditional professions of war, the downgrading of the knighthood which organised its own recruitment and which trained itself on its own and exchanged its services against money or favours. The standardisation not only of armaments and uniforms but also of different tasks permitted the adoption of new tactics which emphasised collective enterprise instead of the simple juxtaposition of isolated and individual actions. The acceptance of the responsibility for the professional training of soldiers (of whom one could merely demand a certain weight and height) by the military administration was extended to the training of officers from the end of the seventeenth century. Thus the army, like the convent, developed, as a result of its own needs, a model of discipline and organisation which foreshadowed that of industrial enterprises. But this tendency towards centralisation and unification was combined with the utilisation of all forms of sub-management which were for a long time regarded as more economical. The small and medium-sized military enterprises not only remained competitive but ensured a more flexible as well as a more effective management of labour and the total cost of operation.⁸

In spite of the growing importance of armaments and fleets of which the production was guaranteed initially by manufactures

undertaken by the state, war remained primarily a labour-centered enterprise. The question of its mobilisation played a decisive role and began to preoccupy, at least from the sixteenth century onwards, all those who reflected on its relationship with the economy. The employment of mercenaries had its logic—the rich preferred to pay others to wage war at a distance from their towns and their fields. But this practice revealed itself to suffer from a twofold disadvantage. On the one hand the rapidly increasing cost of these distant military operations turned out to be a luxury; on the other, it was the economic life of the immediate hinterland of the locales of these military operations which received a stimulus. Each state, each empire was thus faced with the problem of the transfer of wealth from the protected to the frontier provinces. Until around 1580, as long as naval warfare in the Mediterranean engaged the Ottoman and the Spanish empires, it was south Italy and Sicily which prospered as a result of the transfer of money—a prosperity which, though a little artificial was nevertheless real. On the contrary, from 1620 onwards it was they who were called upon to empty their monetary reserves to finance military operations in north Italy and Germany. But these transfers took place also on a higher level, on the scale of the whole of western Europe. In the sixteenth century, it was Spain which took the lead by redistributing a large part of its American treasures from Italy to Germany and Flanders. Spain ruined herself in the process.

Despite avowed mercantilist preoccupations, France progressively took over from Spain in the seventeenth century, followed by England. In the eighteenth century, these two powers, in the words of Accarias de Sérionne writing in 1766, transferred 'billions of currency to the Netherlands, Italy and Germany, as much for the maintenance of their armies as to subsidise them': 'massive sums' fed by the surpluses generated from 'a favourable balance of trade'. A hundred years earlier a disciple of Colbert would have seen it as a clear loss and as a defeat. Three years after the Seven Years' War which seemed so costly for France, Sérionne congratulated himself on the contrary. Not for the stimulating effect that this export of capital would have on the economy of Europe as a whole—the very idea was anachronistic. But, on the contrary, because France and England would, in this way, be able to maintain the advantage of lower prices for their manufactured goods. This would protect them against 'the decadence which would have resulted from an overabundance of currency' and against the 'rapid progress of the nascent

industry in the whole of 'north Germany' and 'countries where it is yet to grow'.

From it follows the surprising conclusion of this text which is strange in its modernity: in the competition which placed France and England in opposite camps in peace-time 'the nation which would succeed in exhausting its money in financing war' would be the nation which would retain the advantage of lower prices for its manufactured goods in times of peace: it would also be the one to succeed with greater ease in reestablishing its superiority in the balance of trade as a result of the preference which nations, enriched by the war, would show for its goods.... An extensive turnover would very soon bring back to the state a large part of the sums which had gone out of it.' It is futile to add that for Séronne, France was more menaced by the surpluses of its balance of trade and more advantaged by wars which obliged it to export its capital and even to take loans. What better 'title of surety' for a nation than 'the position, the resources... the wealth of its natural products and its industry'. The moral imposes itself: If you want to win peace, fight a war. But things are perhaps not all that simple!

NOTES

1. Maréchal de Villars, *Mémoires*, (ed. Marquis de Vogüe) vol. II, Paris, 1880, p. 230.
2. Fritz Redlich, 'De praeda Militari Looting und Booty', p. 79.
3. Philippe Contamine, 'Guerre, fiscalité royale et économie en France (deuxième moitié du XVe siècle)', pp. 70 and 317.
4. Philippe Contamine, *La guerre au Moyen Age*, Paris, 1980, p. 306.
5. Michel Morineau, 'Budgets de l'Etat et gestion des finances royales au XVIIIe siècle', *Revue Historique*, 1980 (536), pp. 315 and 325.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 326.
7. Michael Mallett, *Mercenaries and their Masters: Warfare in Renaissance Italy*, London, 1974, p. 216.
8. Fritz, Redlich. 'The German Military Enterprises and the Work-force', in *Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial-und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, Beiheft, 47, and 48, 1964.

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