



EDITED BY JAN HANSEN, JOCHEN HUNG, JAROSLAV IRA,
JUDIT KLEMENT, SYLVAIN LESAGE, JUAN LUIS SIMAL, AND
ANDREW TOMPKINS

THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History
of Modern Europe, 1500-2000



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3.4.1 Peace and Conflict in Early Modern History (ca. 1500–1800)

Roberto Quirós Rosado and Devin Vartija

Introduction



Fig. 1: Jacob de Gheyn, “Overwinning van Karel V op Frans I bij Pavia” (“Victory of Charles V over Francis I at Pavia”) (1614), Rijksmuseum.nl, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.446432>. At the Battle of Pavia (1525), the army of the King of France was defeated by the more innovative military techniques of the Holy Roman Emperor’s army. In this print, a glorious cavalry unit falls at the hands of a tightly-packed infantry unit equipped with long spears.

Though war has been nearly ubiquitous throughout history, one should not view it as a monolith based on mentalities inherent in human nature, for this would obscure crucial transformations in the causes, practices, and

consequences of war at various epochs in the past. One such 'epoch' that witnessed a crucial transformation in warfare was early modern Europe. Scholars write of an early modern 'military revolution', which links the rise of the 'Modern State' to changing practices of warfare. The creation of standing armies, their increasing size, and the concomitant growth in expenditure and bureaucracy to manage ever more complex strategic and logistical questions all necessitated the consolidation of the modern state apparatus. This is just one of the most significant aspects of the history of conflict and peace in the early modern period. In this chapter, we consider some of the key wars and peace settlements of the early modern period, analyse changes in the technology and practices of warfare, present a framework for understanding the shifting political allegiances and the balance of power across the period, and conclude with reflections on the immense political changes wrought by the practice of warfare.

The Iron Centuries

Tradition and Modernity in the Sixteenth Century

The medieval heritage in the early modern age was more decisive than had been assumed in liberal or Marxist historiographies. There occurred a slow evolution in the field of mentalities, social forms, and pre-industrial technology. During those centuries, this slow evolution would bring together traditional models of human behaviour (persistence of the tripartite structure of society based in *milites*, *oratores*, and *laboratores*) or jurisdictional horizons still based on universalisms (Papacy, Holy Roman Empire, the Portuguese concept around the 'Fifth Empire'), with new geographical-territorial realities in the overseas world or in the forms of government, progressively renewed and institutionalised. Due to the current historiographical doubts about the existence of a 'Modern State', especially for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this renewed consideration for the period can also be checked thanks to the evolution of the Art of War.

Europe—organised politically in a succession of kingdoms, lordships, and republics of Medieval heritage—witnessed a string of conflicts during the first half of the sixteenth century. First, there were the so-called 'Italian Wars': a struggle for political and military hegemony between Valois France, and Trastámara Spain under Isabella and Ferdinand, the Catholic monarchs, that continued during the reign of Emperor Charles V of Habsburg. Second, there was a latent conflict between Christian and Muslim powers. Led by the Spanish monarchs and the Ottoman sultans, and dressed up in the ideals of 'crusade' and 'jihad', Christians and Muslims fought for control of the Balkans, access

to the Danube Valley, and Mediterranean shipping routes. Finally, there were several confessional wars which bloodied much of Central Europe as a result of the Lutheran Reformation. This conflict temporarily gave way to an unstable peace between the contenders during the 1550s. The signing of the Peace of Augsburg (1555), which put an end to armed religious conflict in the Empire, was complemented by another Spanish-French peacemaking negotiation at Cateau-Cambrésis (1559) that sealed Philip II's (1527–1598) influence over Catholic Europe. However, fighting in the Mediterranean did not cease, but rather intensified—as shown by the Ottoman failure at Malta (1565) and the victory of the 'Holy League', formed by Spain and the Italian potentates, over the Turkish armada at Lepanto (1571). Spanish hegemony was shattered over the following decades by the revolt in the Low Countries led by William of Orange with English support, while confessional tensions between Catholics and Calvinists (Huguenots) led late-Valois France to a succession of civil wars. To this accumulation of conflicts in Western Europe was added the emergence of other, new actors (the Russia of Ivan the Terrible, first Tsar since 1547) or the consolidation of territorial powers (the creation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1569), all consequences of years of religious instability, aristocratic seditions, and the rise to power of sovereigns and dynasties with a marked expansionism directed at their neighbours.

European warfare in the sixteenth century progressively expanded into other areas of the world. The expansion of the main European powers to other latitudes was a concrete reality: the Ottoman Empire loomed over the Balkans, Asia Minor and the Levant, as well as Egypt and the southern shores of the Mediterranean; the Monarchy of Spain exerted influence over much of Western and Southern Europe, as well as over parts of Africa, America, and Asia from the time of Charles V and Philip II (who added Portugal and its overseas empire to his inherited possessions); the kingdoms of France and England, as well as the United Provinces of the Netherlands, progressively turned to search for new global markets at the expense of the Spanish-Portuguese dynastic conglomerate.

In any case, the Ottoman, Spanish, and Dutch influence in European warfare was based on different, successful and advanced military systems. At the end of the fifteenth century and in the first decades of the sixteenth century, a mixture of ancient and modern warfare practices can be seen clearly in the War of Granada (1482–1492) and the Italian Wars (1494–1559). On a continent accustomed to long and bloody conflicts, martial practices still revolved around chivalry and its codes of honour. The role of the military nobility in the Franco-Burgundian tradition was hegemonic in the conduct of conflicts but, at the same time, was challenged by new innovations in weaponry and strategy. The periodic demise of the French aristocratic elite in battles (Crécy,

1346; Azincourt, 1415) continued during the struggle for dominance over Italy, when Habsburg German mercenary troops or Spanish infantry annihilated the Valois cavalry (Pavia, 1525; Saint Quentin, 1557). The innovative successes of the Habsburgs would therefore come from a communion between the service of the nobility in arms and new corps equipped with heavy artillery, pikes, and firearms integrated into *coronelías* (Spanish military corps organised by Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, the Great Captain (1453–1515)) and the consequent *tercios* (formed by Charles V between 1534 and 1536). This would not mean the demise of chivalric usages, especially in a monarchy—such as the Spanish one—whose highest award was the Order of the Golden Fleece and which had numerous knights belonging to the Order of Malta or the Castilian, Valencian, and Portuguese military ‘religions’. This symbiosis, as in other European cases, was based on the dissemination of the archetype of the courtier, skilled in arms and letters, as advocated by Count Baldassare Castiglione (1478–1529) in his book *Il Cortegiano* (published in 1528).

The triumph of the Habsburgs (Charles V and Philip II) over France did not tarnish the success that other powers would enjoy on the continent and in the Mediterranean world. The successful model of military organisation employed by the Ottoman Empire was a case in point. After the conquest of Constantinople (1453) and Turkish expansion over the last Byzantine or Latin principalities in both Asia Minor (Trebizond) and Greece (Athens, Mystras) during the reign of Mehmet II, the need to subdue the Empire’s opponents beyond the Danube or the Mamluk Empire required the optimisation of its resources. The forced recruitment and Islamisation of Christian children from lands dominated by the Sublime Porte created a large pool of human capital, the Janissaries, who were fully trained in war and loyal to the sultan and his grand viziers. Alongside the Janissaries, the *sipahis*—Turks who owned a fief (*timar*)—provided the Ottoman land armies with a large cavalry corps, while a systematic plan was implemented to build artillery galleys which, in conjunction with the corsairs of the Barbary Regencies, would periodically ravage the Italian and Iberian coasts and confront the naval forces of the King of Spain or the Grand Master of the Knights Hospitaller of Malta.

Finally, between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and as a direct consequence of the rebellion of Dutch nobles and cities against Philip II, a new system of military order and strategy emerged, one that would have a decisive influence on the evolution of warfare for the rest of the early modern age: the military innovations of Maurice of Orange-Nassau (1567–1625). The son of Prince William of Orange (1533–1584), from his youth he was trained in the combat practices of the Flemish rebels and their English, French, and German allies against the Spanish *tercios*. With strongly disciplined but fewer than usual troops, able to sustain a continuous rate of fire of arquebuses and

muskets, the stadtholder Maurice managed to conquer several positions in Flanders and Brabant, and even to beat the armies of the new Habsburg ruler, Archduke Albert (1559–1621) at the Battle of Nieuwpoort (1600). By then, the war in the Low Countries had become a chessboard in which infantry, and cavalry, galleys and galleons, and (above all) strongholds and bastions designed on the mathematical *trace italienne* settled a conflict that would last for eight decades.

Dynasticism and the Struggle for Continental Hegemony

These advances in military order and technology conditioned the conflicts that continued to emerge at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Crucial elements of warfare were continuous with the preceding century. Dynasticism—the preservation of a ruling family’s territory and titles—continued to play a central role in international relations and therefore was indisputably the most common cause of war, at least until the early eighteenth century. The seventeenth century witnessed the consolidation of the fiscal-military state as well as a decisive shift in the balance of power on continental Europe, from Habsburg (Spanish and Austrian) to Bourbon (French), English, and Dutch hegemony. The century also witnessed the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), which was arguably the most significant war of the period.

The Thirty Years’ War was the most lethal conflict Europe had seen until that date and would remain the most lethal until the World Wars of the twentieth century. The outbreak of the Thirty Years’ War highlights the importance of two features central to early modern warfare: dynastic inheritance and intractable religious conflict. When the Austrian Habsburg heir Archduke Ferdinand (1578–1637) was crowned King of Bohemia in 1617, he began curtailing the rights of Protestants, which led to the revolt of the Estate of Bohemia. The Protestant Frederick V (1596–1632), the Palatine Elector, accepted the throne of the rebellious Estate of Bohemia, a move that would have overturned the Catholic majority of the seven electors of the Holy Roman Empire. The stage was set for a European-wide conflict, as Archduke Ferdinand secured the support of the Spanish Habsburgs and many of the Catholic German states, while Frederick V allied with the rulers of some of the most important Protestant territories—Transylvania, the United Provinces, Brandenburg, and several smaller Calvinist German states. Frederick V also received more tenuous support from his father-in-law, James I of England (1566–1625), Christian IV of Denmark (1577–1648), and from the French, the main dynastic rivals of the Habsburgs. Although the role of confessional strife is clear in the outbreak and course of the Thirty Years’ War, it should not be exaggerated either, as the French Bourbons fought against the Spanish and

Austrian Habsburgs—Catholic powers—demonstrating that dynastic rivalry could trump religious concordance. Fighting was not continuous over the thirty years, as historians traditionally divide the conflict into four phases: (1) the Bohemian Period, 1618–1625; (2) the Danish Period, 1625–1630; (3) the Swedish Period, 1630–1635; and (4) the Swedish-French Period, 1635–1648. The scale of the fighting during the war was unprecedented and so were the effects of the war on civilians, especially in the German lands.

The Thirty Years' War ended with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 after years of negotiations involving all the states active in the conflict, rather than two or three of the major participants. This was unprecedented and would serve as a model for peace negotiations for centuries to come, consolidating as it did the development of permanent diplomatic representation and the commitment of powerful European states to guaranteeing peace settlements. Diplomacy as a distinct institution only developed from the sixteenth century onwards and became increasingly well-defined across the early modern period, with the Peace of Westphalia giving its evolution a significant boost. France and Sweden gained the most from the peace settlement, as France replaced Spain as the preeminent power on the continent and Sweden gained several northern territories of the Holy Roman Empire. The Habsburgs were the greatest losers of the peace settlement, as the Spanish recognised Dutch independence and the Austrians ceded autonomy to the Swiss Confederation and the German princes of the Holy Roman Empire.

During the early modern period through to the last quarter of the seventeenth century, armies consisting of relatively ill-trained, rapidly recruited troops were the norm in Europe. This changed dramatically after the Peace of Westphalia, as sovereigns were wary of troops who were often more loyal to commanding officers (nearly always noblemen) than to distant political rulers. The most significant example of the establishment and growth of standing armies in the second half of the seventeenth century is France, which had an army of about 55,000 troops in the 1660s under the reign of Louis XIV (1638–1715), five times larger than any preceding standing army and the largest in Europe besides that of the Ottoman Empire. These troops were better trained and reflect the importance of the rise of the fiscal-military state, as maintaining such a large army required a more centralised bureaucracy capable of raising the necessary funds. Louis XIV fought three wars in the seventeenth century: the War of Devolution (1667–1668), the Dutch War (1672–1678), and the War of the League of Augsburg (1688–1697). The first two wars were spectacularly successful for Louis XIV, gaining France new territory in the Spanish Netherlands and the western lands of the Holy Roman Empire. This demonstrated the success of the new military machine created under Louis XIV's rule, with the help of his Minister of War Michel Le Tellier (1603–1685) and his son, the Marquis

de Louvois (1641–1691). But France was also immensely strained under the pressure to maintain such a large army and navy and had to agree to the Treaty of Rijswijk (1697) that ended the War of the League of Augsburg, forcing Louis XIV, the so-called ‘Sun King’, to return almost all the territory he had gained since 1679.

European Warfare until Napoleon

The eighteenth century opened with a major conflict, the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1713), which was settled by the Peace of Utrecht (1713–1714). Three features and consequences of the Peace of Utrecht would characterise geopolitics throughout the century: the fall of France as the most powerful player in European politics, the rise of Great Britain and Russia as major military powers, and the increasing tendency for European conflicts to involve colonial territories far away from Europe. The war began when Spanish King Charles II (1661–1700) died without an heir. He declared Louis XIV’s second grandson, Philip, Duke of Anjou (1683–1746), as his successor, which the Austrian Emperor Leopold I (1640–1705) refused to accept. France lost a series of battles against the Holy Roman Empire and England, led by Prince Eugene (1663–1736) and the Duke of Marlborough (1650–1722) respectively. Under the terms of the Peace of Utrecht, Philip was recognised as King but had to renounce any claims to the French throne (thus barring unification of the kingdoms), and France ceded territory in Canada to the British: Newfoundland, the Hudson Bay area, and most of Nova Scotia. Another succession war, that of the Austrian Succession (1740–1748), occurred when Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI (1685–1740) died without a male heir and the Prussian King Frederick II (1712–1786) thought that Charles VI’s daughter, the newly-crowned Austrian Empress Maria Theresa (1717–1780), would be too weak to stop his invasion of the rich Austrian territory of Silesia. France joined the fray to humiliate its long-standing enemies, the Austrians, and Great Britain allied with Austria to prevent the French from taking the Austrian Netherlands. The Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle (1748) that ended the conflict, recognised Maria Theresa as Empress of Austria, but she had to recognise Prussian control of Silesia; Frederick II’s (later Frederick the Great’s) Prussia became established as a great European power with the most efficient and well-organised army of the era.

The Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle failed to resolve long-standing colonial disputes, however, and just eight years later, in 1756, there occurred a major realignment of the European powers and the outbreak of what British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (1874–1965) would later famously call the ‘first world war’: the Seven Years’ War (1756–1763). Prussia and Great Britain signed a defensive alliance, which prompted Austria to overlook centuries of enmity with France and ally with Louis XV (1710–1774) in what historians

call the 'Diplomatic Revolution'. The Seven Years' War had two root causes: continental rivalry between Austria and Prussia, and colonial rivalry between France and Great Britain. Frederick the Great won an astounding victory against a much larger Franco-Austrian army at Rossbach in Saxony in 1757, but was soon surrounded by the combined forces of the French, Austrian, and Russian armies. An accident of history saved Frederick the Great, as Empress Elizabeth of Russia (1709–1762) died in 1762, succeeded by the great admirer of Frederick and Prussia, Peter III (1728–1762). Russia thus concluded a peace treaty with Prussia and Frederick was able to hold onto all his territories. Great Britain enjoyed naval superiority from the 1750s onwards and was able to defeat French fleets in North America, India, and the West Indies. The Treaty of Paris (1763), which ended the conflict, had truly colossal consequences: France ceded all of Canada to Britain and removed its military from India, but kept its wealthy West Indian islands. The desire to avenge this humiliating defeat was one of the reasons why France supported the American revolutionaries in the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783), support that was crucial to its success.

Two elements fundamental to modern warfare would develop in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras (1789–1815): a popular, subscription-based army infused with patriotism, and the mobilisation of almost all of society's resources for warfare ('total war'). Revolutionary and Napoleonic France was at war with every European power at one point or another in this period, and was sometimes in conflict with all at once. While initially suffering from disorder and lack of experience, the revolutionary army quickly won spectacular victories, partially thanks to the use of innovative battle tactics made possible by patriotic troops fighting for a revolution they themselves had helped to create. Napoleon (1769–1821) was able to mobilise the energy unleashed by the revolution into a very effective war machine capable of fighting quick and decisive battles, trampling over the balance of power system that had characterised the conduct of war throughout the eighteenth century. Once Napoleon met his demise in Russia and Waterloo between 1812 and 1815, there developed a new conception of European international relations captured by the term 'Concert of Europe'. This was characterised by greater self-restraint on the part of large power players and the more ready recognition that the legitimate interests of other states must be recognised for longer-term stability to be achieved.

Conclusion

European warfare changed so dramatically in the early modern period that if an observer from 1500 could have witnessed practices of war and peace in 1800,

she would have been utterly astonished. Perhaps most significantly, the size of armies increased dramatically across this period. During the Thirty Years' War, the average size of an army in battle was 19,000; by the Napoleonic Wars a century and a half later, the average size had nearly quadrupled to 84,000. The resources required to coordinate and administer such large and complex movements of troops contributed to the consolidation of the modern state as a powerful institution that centralised its political power. The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation added a new, religious dimension to conflicts both within and between European states, reaching its nadir in the bloodiest conflict of the period, the Thirty Years' War. In the sixteenth century, France fought the Habsburgs of Spain and Austria for continental hegemony but had to contend with rising Dutch and Swedish power in the seventeenth century. By the mid-eighteenth century, France's military power had been decisively checked by a more powerful Great Britain and Prussia. While European conflicts already had a global dimension in the sixteenth century, transoceanic connections intensified especially in the eighteenth century, meaning that developments in colonies far from the European continent could directly impact conflicts internal to Europe at an unprecedented scale by the outbreak of the Seven Years' War of the mid-eighteenth century. Not only did warfare change, but so, too, did practices of establishing and maintaining peace. Arguably, the most significant development in this regard was the establishment of permanent diplomatic representation between states and the rise of the idea of a balance of power that states should be committed to maintaining. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment saw the birth of both the perspective that war should be made more 'humane' since it cannot be avoided, and the perspective that perpetual peace is a real possibility (as in Immanuel Kant's famous 1795 tract), two views that continue to underpin debates about war and peace in the twenty-first century.

Discussion questions

1. What role did religion play in peace and conflict in early modern Europe?
2. Why was the Thirty Years' War so transformational for early modern Europe?
3. Early modern warfare was closely related to the development of the state, for example in raising taxes for standing armies. Do you see any parallels to modern warfare?

Suggested reading

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