

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**James B. Wood.** *The King's Army: Warfare, Soldiers, and Society during the French Wars of Religion, 1562-1576.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. xvi + 349 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-55003-1.

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James Wood is no stranger to early modern historians. In 1980, he produced an important book, *The Nobility of the Election of Bayeux, 1463-1666* (Princeton, 1980), and in 1984 he was awarded the Nancy Lyman Roelker Prize for his "Impact of the Wars of Religion: A View of France in 1581" in the *Sixteenth Century Journal*. In this book, he has delivered us the results of his most recent research on the royal army during five of the eight generally recognized phases of the Wars of Religion.

The author sets himself three goals at the outset of the book: first, to write a social history of warfare during the period in order to make comprehensible the apparently confused and disordered engagements and pursuit of the wars; second, to explain early modern military affairs and institutions to both the specialist and to the general historian; third, to "never lose sight of the human dimensions of the wars" (p. xiii). His principal argument is that the inability of the French royal army to win a decisive victory over the Huguenots stemmed from "a deep and intractable set of military problems" (p. 4) which he proceeds to analyze.

Wood's analysis, and the resulting book, is divided into three major segments. In the first three essentially narrative chapters, he describes the pursuit of the wars up to 1567, explaining the heritage of outmoded organizational patterns and the difficulties encountered in trying to exploit victories. In the following three chapters, which comprise the second segment, Wood analyzes the social composition, the numerical strength, and the innovations brought to the three major components of the army—the infantry, the *gendarmerie*, and the artillery. The third section focuses on four case studies of typical army conduct: Dreux to study the delivery of a major battle (1562), Chartres to examine resistance to a siege (1567-68), Moncontour to analyze troop displacements and reinforcements during the march from bivouac at Saumur (1568-69), and finally La Rochelle to show the build up, conduct, and eventual defeat of the royal army during the siege of that place as a major turning point in the wars

(1573). In addition to these three sections, there is a final chapter on financing the wars which Wood sees as a major obstacle to the whole wartime effort.

The book is well organized and well written. As might be expected from a socio-economic historian like Wood, each of his arguments is explained and illustrated by graphs, charts, and maps which make it particularly easy to follow the author's reasoning. The initial section of the book makes the point that after the engagements and campaigning in the area around Paris during the first war (1562-63), the battles and confrontations in the second, third, and successive wars occurred farther and farther from the capital. Longer and time-consuming marches resulted, necessitating transportation of cumbersome heavy artillery from the Paris arsenal with corresponding increases in army expenses and disorganization of military strategy. For Wood, this spreading out of the military effort was one of the principal factors which explains the "failure" of the royal army to secure decisive victory in the wars.

The section on the three major components of the army is more exciting for the social historian. Wood goes to great length to dissect the make-up and functioning of the different army divisions. He uses 1567 muster rolls of two companies of French infantry (a regular company under Count Brissac and a garrison company under Jean de Montluc) to demonstrate the hierarchical, social, physical, and age differences between them and to analyze the typical social composition of the infantry. He proceeds to show that the Duke of Guise organized the first infantry regiments and that throughout the wars the Crown relied mainly on French infantry using limited numbers of Swiss or German mercenaries.

The same kind of analysis is applied to the *gendarmerie*, or the cavalry, which Wood shows to have been overwhelmingly of noble origin to the point that the Crown, fearing the loss of too many great nobles, frequently opposed major armed confrontations. In contrast to Robert Harding's argument on the demise of the

*gendarmerie*, Wood argues that, in the course of the Wars of Religion, these noble troops became the heart and soul of the army.[1] If there was any change, it was the high rate of attrition among cavalry companies during the early wars. Until the fifth war, the original *gendarme* companies furnished up to 50 percent of the soldiers, but after 1577-78 the situation changed with the regiments being made up of recent recruits.

Finally, concerning the artillery, Wood shows the personnel of the Arsenal in Paris to have been overwhelmingly composed of skilled urban craftsmen. He proceeds to show the requirements of the artillery component, the standardization of its stocks of cannon, the locations of the arsenals, and the enormous difficulties of transporting this equipment especially as the wars moved away from more central locations. Working from arsenal inventory reports, he indicates the toll which the wars took on artillery stocks: by 1572-73 barrels were listed as burst, ventholes enlarged, carriages and wheels rotten.

The author's case studies of typical army conduct go into considerable detail concerning military engagements. Certainly, Wood's description of how the two sides almost stumbled into the Dreux confrontation is enlightening. His analysis of the La Rochelle siege, the blunders of the royal army, and its inactivity (during 81 percent of the time of the siege [335 days], there was absolutely no enemy contact), certainly brings home the nature of sixteenth-century warfare. However, this section is somewhat repetitive, and one wonders whether the author could not have consolidated and controlled his material more effectively.

Finally, in "Paying for War" Wood comes to what he presents in the conclusion (p. 306) as one of the two fundamental explanations for the failures of royal forces: the lack of proper financing (the other basic explanation being the shift of the operational focus of the wars away from the north and the Paris region). Unfortunately, this relatively short chapter on the insufficiencies of wartime finance concentrates almost exclusively on the *etats* produced by the *tresor royal*, on the financing of musters in army papers, and on the work by Martin Wolfe.[2] In relying so heavily on central government documents, Wood misses the point concerning the increasingly decentralized taxation system put into place to finance the war effort. He made little note of the argument on fiscal absolutism by L. S. Van Doren, who has shown that by 1572 the royal authorities in the Dauphine were unilaterally and unconstitutionally increasing taxes approved by the Estates of the province.[3] Using central govern-

ment documents, Wood argues that the Crown was not able to raise more money, but he does not seem to realize that at least three times the amounts listed in the *etats* were actually collected in the provinces. These amounts were syphoned off by each step in the collection process and this problem was aggravated as the wars progressed. In addition to the tax collectors, armies often arrived in villages to collect what they considered their due.[4] By 1578 and the 1580s, the negotiated truces actually contained clauses stipulating that both royal and Huguenot garrisons could collect funds directly from the villages rather than depend on Crown payments.[5] In fact, this deteriorating fiscal situation would have reinforced Wood's argument that the war effort was more and more out of control after 1575-76. By neglecting to treat this point and by relying on central government papers, he missed an opportunity to achieve one of the important objectives of his book, to describe the human dimensions of the wars.

Nevertheless, Wood has made a first-rate contribution to both the social history of warfare and to our knowledge of military organization and institutions in sixteenth-century France. His book places military structures in their context and assesses them in action. Unfortunately, due to a frustrating lack of documentation, it is narrowly focused on the first five wars and especially on the 1560s. In fact, the book is almost an example of micro-history with its fascinating thematic and socio-economic analyses. It is an important contribution to sixteenth century studies.

#### Notes:

[1]. Robert R. Harding, *Anatomy of a Power Elite: The Provincial Governors of Early Modern France* (New Haven, 1978).

[2]. Martin Wolfe, *The Fiscal System of Renaissance France* (New Haven, 1972).

[3]. L. S. Van Doren, "Civil War Taxation and the Foundations of Fiscal Absolutism: the Royal *Taille* in Dauphine, 1560-1610," *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History*, 3 (1975): pp. 35-53. Wood also neglected to consult Van Doren's thesis which is fundamental ("War, Taxes, and Social Protest: The Challenge to Authority in Sixteenth Century Dauphine," Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1970).

[4]. See my *Coming of French Absolutism: The Struggle for Tax Reform in the Province of Dauphine* (Toronto, 1986), pp. 33-44.

[5]. Resume of Dauphine Estates meeting, 4 July 1578, in Fauche-Prunelle, "Le Livre du Roy," *Bulletin de*

*l'Academie delphinale*, 1 (1846); and "Treve de 26 mars 1589," in Simon Goulard, *Memoires de la Ligue* (Amsterdam), 20 vols., 1758: 3: pp. 289-90.

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