

# H-Net Reviews

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John Lynn. *Giant of the Grand Siecle: The French Army, 1610-1715*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xx + 651 pp. \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-57273-6.

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John Lynn's *Giant of the Grand Siecle* is a giant of a book, not only in length but also in substance. The author is an unreconstructed, perhaps I should say, "undeconstructed," institutional historian, with a chip on his shoulder about the bad rap which military history has received at the hands of the politically correct. He is not entirely a Rankian or *historien de papa*, narrative not being his forte, but he does maintain that military history should concentrate on the practice of warfare and not concern itself unduly with such social marginalia as the lives of soldiers after they have stopped fighting.

Nor is the feisty Lynn much more tolerant of his orthodox colleagues. He criticizes the Roberts-Parker-Black notion of a technologically impelled "military revolution" in the sixteenth century by countering it with a more "evolutionary" approach "driven by conceptual and institutional development" (p. xv).[1] Armed with this revisionary weapon, he launches into his own analysis of the French army of the seventeenth century, which he feels has been sadly neglected since the venerable efforts of Camille Rousset, Albert Babeau, and Louis Andre-well aware, of course, that his own work will be "necessarily incomplete" (p. xvii).[2]

What Lynn proposes to substitute for the "Military Revolution" is a seven stage evolutionary process, which goes from 1) Feudal—a la William the Conqueror; 2) to Medieval Stipendiary—seen in the Hundred Years' War; 3) to Aggregate Contract—Machiavelli's nemesis; 4) to State Commission—personified by Louis XIV; 5) to the Popular Conscript—set to music in "La Marseillaise"; 6) to the Mass Reserve—which gave us World Wars I and II; and finally 7) to the Volunteer Technical—U.S. President Richard Nixon's enduring legacy. This all opposed to the Aggregate Contract armies, in which a ruler would purchase entire armies, as Lynn puts it "off the shelf" (p. 6), with the State Commission army "the king now issued commissions to officers to raise and train regiments in the king's name in accord with royal ordinances" (p. 7).

Lynn is nothing if not systematic. He starts off with

the basic question of army strength. Here, slightly contradicting his own lamentations, Lynn's own impressive researches are supported by those of Bernhard Kroener, published in 1980,[3] and the results have broad implications. For one thing, in the earlier part of Louis XIV's personal reign, in the mid-1670s, the paper strength of the army, about 260,000, comes very close to matching the actual strength, quite a recommendation for the statist interpretation of "absolutism," which argues that the absolute monarchy exercised rigorous control over its own instruments of power. For another, in the later part of his reign, even though the paper strength does become more questionable, Vauban, the great military engineer, estimated that the strength of the army rose to some 438,000, which, even if he was exaggerating somewhat, is another recommendation for the statist interpretation of an absolute monarchy able to harness the energies of its subjects. What is odd is that here, forgetting his own "conceptual and institutional approach", Lynn tries to tie this army growth to demographic growth. If so, however, why did the army of Louis XIV grow so much during the seventeenth century, whereas the population of France did not? And why was the army of Louis XV, who had on the average about four million more subjects, smaller than the army of Louis XIV? Still, the hard and stubbornly accumulated data on army strength gives us a lot to reflect upon.

Less informative is Lynn's treatment of military administration, where he seems to rely almost exclusively on the classical sources and their modern recapitulations. The problem is that we all have already heard about secretaries of war, commissioners, intendants, and treasurers, but we do not make much progress in learning just exactly what each of these officials contributed to the system *in relation* to each other and to the fighting capacity of the army. Lynn's general point seems to be that gradually, and especially in the course of the seventeenth century, the state took over more and more of the functions of control over its army, such as the development of permanent magazines and the establishment of way

stations (*etapes*). At this juncture, therefore, we might merely start dismissing him as another in the long line of militaristic, nationalist, state worshiping chauvinists. But he does not stop there.

For little by little, Lynn begins to play on what appears at first to be a minor qualification, but slowly emerges as an overwhelming point, bearing definitively on the relation between the development of the state and the development of armies in early modern Europe, namely that the French monarchy, in creating its army, created, so to speak, a Frankenstein monster, which was constantly outgrowing the capacity of the state to control. The monarchy's State Commission army, therefore, constituted a compromise between greater control and an incapacity to control. Witness what Lynn calls the "tax of violence," which was simply the tendency of Mercenary and Aggregate Contract armies to pillage for themselves. In the course of the seventeenth century, beginning with the Thirty Years' War, this tax of violence commonly became transformed into *contributions*, a more regularized form of extortion imposed by *royal officials* upon the inhabitants of *occupied territories*. But in a most telling conclusion which emerges from his penetrating distinction, Lynn estimates that, as late as 1703, at least 43 percent of the cost of operating a field army came from *contributions*! This blows quite a hole into the statist interpretation of "absolutism."

It is a tough read, but the same point emerges in Lynn's treatment of the French officer corps. As he shows, the State Commission army constituted a compromise between a greater degree of control exercised by the state over its top military commanders, and the impossibility of micro-managing the regimental units. One problem was that colonels and captains owned their posts. Another problem was that they were expected to spend a good deal of their own resources to maintain their units. The monarchy contributed the bare essentials, but never enough to cover all the costs, even in the best of times. Thus, the monarchy had to rely upon what Lynn calls the "culture of command," the readiness and willingness of the officer corps to sacrifice their wealth, as well as their lives, to the holy trinity of *gloire*, masculinity, and, last but not least, independence. This is another hole blown by Lynn into the statist interpretation of "absolutism."

What Lynn does not remark upon, and perhaps there is no reason why he should in this particular book, is that the same kind of compromise between state control and local independence is characteristic of Louis XIV's "absolutism" throughout. Andrew Lossky was the first, though

by no means the last historian to criticize the statist interpretation of "absolutism." His point is beautifully exemplified by Albert Hamscher and William Beik when they focus their attention on the relationship between Louis XIV and the judiciary.[4] Louis XIV could have completely eliminated the venality of offices for the judiciary and substantially reduced its independence, just as he could have completely eliminated the venality of offices in the military and brought it entirely under royal control, but he could not have done both while at the same time carrying on his wars. Instead, he chose to impose greater discipline upon the top echelons of each profession, while allowing the lower echelons to entrench themselves. Why he made the choices he did is one of the great mysteries of his personal *mentalite*. He seemed to be able to see no further than this arrangement, which fitted neatly with his conception of how the world should work. In his own words, he merely wanted to "reduce all things to their natural order" and, moreover, he felt "a secret inclination for arms and for those in this profession." [5] Louis XIV, therefore, was never out to change the structure of society in the first place, and when it came to a choice between state building by administrative centralization and state building by territorial acquisition, he invariably opted for the second. The unspoken implication of Lynn's thesis, therefore, is that the army did not strengthen the French monarchy; it weakened it by stretching the resources of the monarchy beyond its limits and by preventing the monarchy from exercising freely its authority over the army itself and over the society in general. Yet Louis XIV had little idea that his army, the giant of the *grand siecle*, may have been no match for an even greater colossus which he neglected, the society of the *grand siecle*. Yet it was this society which, with a little help from Louis XVI, ultimately overpowered the monarchy and created a new kind of army.

Even though Lynn takes quantification very seriously—witness his attentive treatment of army strength—he is very skeptical of its implementation by the more avant garde military historians, such as Andre Corvisier.[6] As Lynn writes, "After thirty years of dealing with these figures, they have told us little about the army as a fighting instrument" (p. 337). Furthermore, Lynn finds no basis for Corvisier's conclusions about the seventeenth century French army's high degree of patriotism. To Lynn, even though, as the century progressed, the monarchy took increasing responsibility for the welfare of its soldiers, the army of the *grand siecle* was held together much more by individual and group loyalty than by any abstract loyalty to the French nation.

Lynn provides an admirable description of military formations and siege operations in a age of what he calls “positional warfare,” with a heavy emphasis on drill, discipline, and fortification. He quite correctly observes that the seventeenth century consciously aimed at a more antiseptic style of warfare, parsimonious for the most part with the lives of its soldiers and quarantined, as much as possible, from the productive sectors of civilian life. But where Lynn is dead wrong and desperately in need of my intervention is in claiming that “Louis XIV was more concerned with protecting his domains than with extending his possessions” (p. 548), as if the king’s first and foremost preoccupation was a defensive one. Here Lynn displays that for all of his protestations against the new history, he is still trapped by the new historical conviction that institutions, structures, systems, discourses, or what have you, provide some sort of substitute for individual responsibility. He is also caught in the grips of Louis XIV’s own party line. For when Louis XIV began his personal reign in 1661, no one in the entire world threatened his domains. Thus, he did not need to create a giant of the *grand siècle* in order to defend them. If Louis was obliged to defend himself against the combined powers of Europe, it is because, in his desire to establish a reputation as one of the greatest of kings, he had deliberately and ostentatiously provoked all the other European powers into viewing him as a menace and into uniting against him. We shall never be able to answer the question of whether a wiser king than Louis might have been able to transcend the vanities of a stereotypical absolute monarch, but I have attempted to demonstrate in *Louis XIV and the Origins of the Dutch War* (Cambridge, 1988) that there were ministers within his own council who did offer him alternative policies. The giant of the *grand siècle* was as much a creation of Louis XIV as Frankenstein’s monster was a creation of Dr. Frankenstein.

What is odd is that in spite of his brilliant and incisive description of the limitations of “absolutism,” Lynn insists on the applicability of the term to early modern monarchy. “Seek absolutism,” he writes, “not in the concerns of an early modern social, economic, and cultural critic, but in the concerns of an early modern monarch—control over his government, foreign policy, and army” (p. 599). But that is just it! Any undergraduate, let alone any social, economic, and cultural critic, is justified in expecting more from the term “absolutism” than a slightly greater degree of control over the higher echelons of government. Relative absolutism is a contradiction in terms. Lynn is much closer to the mark (and to his own researches) when he concludes with the question, “Could an essential element in the king’s repressive

forces be a new relationship with local forces which now served the monarchy’s interest whereas they had once opposed them?” (p. 605). I think the answer is a resounding yes! “Absolutism” all over Europe depended on a pervasive fear of socio-religious disorder and a corresponding willingness to put up with one’s local monarch, of which armies, diplomacy, palaces, and wars were merely the ruler’s dividend, to squander in whatever fashion he thought best. We are left with an immense gulf between Louis XIV’s elegant gesticulations, on the one hand, and social trends from which he profited, but which he could neither conceive of nor control, on the other.

This is not to say that Lynn has not produced a masterful work, which will serve as a landmark for future military historians. This is why his call for further study is particularly compelling, and I take the liberty to suggest the quantity and quality of sources which, in keeping with his appeal, are waiting to be exploited. Lynn himself has not been able to examine exhaustively every one of the two thousand or so volumes of the military correspondence in the A/1 series of the Archives of War at Vincennes, volumes in which insights into administrative and social history sit side by side with the narratives of military operations. But that is not all; scattered throughout the pages of the *Conseil du Roi* series in the *Archives nationales* (E,V et. al.) and the genealogical records at the *Bibliothèque nationale*, not to speak of the notarial acts in the *Archives nationales* and *Archives départementales*, are millions of independent pieces of information about military careers and the relationship between the military and society. The problem is how to get at them, how to fashion research projects which will make this mountain of data manageable. Perhaps this will have to wait for digitization. But one thing is certain, and Lynn is perfectly right about it: *Toute histoire est honorable*. What we need are more facts, not more condescension.

#### Notes

[1]. Michael Roberts, *The Military Revolution: 1560-1660* (London, 1958); Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West: 1500-1800* (Cambridge, 1988); Jeremy Black, *A Military Revolution? Military Change and European Society: 1500-1800* (Atlantic Highlands, 1991)

[2]. Camille Rousset, *Histoire de Louvois* 4 vols. (Paris, 1862-1864); Albert Babeau, *La Vie militaire sous l’ancien régime* (Paris, 1890); Louis Andre, *Michel Le Tellier et l’organisation de l’armée monarchique* (Paris, 1906).

[3]. Bernhard Kroener, *Les routes et les étapes: Die Versorgung der französischen Armeen in Nordostfrankre-*

ich, 1635-1661 (Munster, 1980).

[4] . For Andrew Lossky's originality in criticizing the statist interpretation of "absolutism," see Sonnino (ed.), *The Reign of Louis XIV: Essays in Celebration of Andrew Lossky* (Atlantic Highlands, 1990), p. 4. See also Albert N. Hamscher, *The Parlement of Paris after the Fronde, 1653-1673* (Pittsburgh, 1976); and William Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth Century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge, 1985).

[5]. Sonnino (ed.), *Louis XIV: Memoires for the Instruction of the Dauphin* (New York & London, 1970), pp. 43, 157.

[6]. Andre Corvisier, *L'Armee francaise de la fin du XVIIe siecle au ministere de Choiseul: le soldat*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1964).

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