

H-Net Reviews

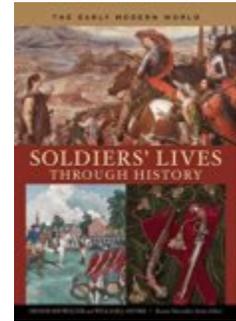
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dennis Showalter, William J. Astore. *Soldiers' Lives through History: The Early Modern World*. Soldiers' Lives through History Series. Portsmouth: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007. 320 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-33312-5.

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About Soldiers, More or Less

In the 1970s, traditional military history found itself increasingly on the defensive. Although popular works on the subject continued to appear, inside academia a “new military history” was gaining prominence, with scholars increasingly focused on the intersections between war and society. The view “from below” and from beyond the battlefield began receiving considerable study, with recruitment, the economic underpinnings of war, soldier-civilian interactions, and state building being just a few of the subjects explored in detail.[1] Traditional topics, such as battles, military strategy, and great power politics, were increasingly critiqued as outmoded and irrelevant, prompting traditionalists to fight back. Dennis Showalter offered one response, making his case in “A Modest Plea for Drums and Trumpets” published in the April 1975 issue of *Military Affairs*, forerunner to *The Journal of Military History* and the primary journal of those interested in traditional military history. Showalter warned in this short piece that any attempt to explain military events by relying solely on the broader civilian social and economic context was bankrupt without appreciating the extent to which every army is driven by military-specific goals. In short, despite the flurry of interest in war and society, armies still needed to be studied “both as military instruments and in the performance of their primary function,” not just as reflections of their social contexts.[2] In the thirty years since, the division between so-called war and society history and traditional military history has persisted—witness recent debates in the popular press about the extent to which the academy

is biased against traditional military history. War and society history continues to flourish and now includes cultural explanations of conflict, while traditional military historians have also maintained their own respective focus on the “sharp edge” of military history. Only a few scholars have sought to bridge the divide.

Since his 1975 article, Showalter has continued to publish on a wide range of topics, largely Central European, with books ranging from the wars of Frederick the Great to World War I, World War II, and beyond. Most recently among these is a 2005 work on Paul von Hindenburg, coauthored with William J. Astore. Now Showalter and Astore have again teamed up to tackle a quite different subject, a survey of soldiers’ lives in the early modern world. Showalter (editor of the Greenwood series of which this is a part) and Astore declare here their goal to provide an overview of how soldiers lived during the early modern period. Chronologically, this ranges from the inauguration of France’s wars in Italy in 1494 (conventionally seen as the beginning of the gunpowder age) to the eve of the French Revolution in 1789 (which saw the introduction of mass armies and ideological warfare). Although a book on soldiers’ lives would seem to require an accommodation with the war and society school, the framework that Showalter laid out in his plea for battles and operational history thirty years earlier is clearly visible in this new work.

The book is organized into eight main chapters. After

a brief series' foreword and introduction laying out their intention to "present a comprehensive, nuanced analysis of the men who were the first to be called 'soldiers' rather than warriors," the book begins with a thirty-page prologue, which introduces the reader to a triptych of three important early modern battles: those of Pavia in 1525, Breitenfeld in 1631, and Leuthen in 1757 (p. xii). After a detailed narrative of these battles, the first chapter shifts to a broad overview of the "matrix of war," the political, social, economic, and strategic contexts in which such battles (and others) were waged. Chapter 2 then turns to the men who did the fighting, discussing their enlistment, terms of service, and tactical training, as well as an excursus into how Eastern European armies differed from their Western European peers. A third chapter explores in slightly more detail the tactics and military technologies used by these troops—fortifications and siege warfare, as well as the respective tactics of infantry musketry and cavalry charges. Chapter 4 sets its sights higher up the ranks, examining the changing role of officers as they morphed from the military entrepreneurs of the Renaissance to aristocratic nobles of the baroque era into the technocratic officers serving in Frederick the Great's professionalized military machine. One final page of chapter 4 is dedicated to the relationship between the leader and the led. Chapter 5 covers the variety of motivations that encouraged (or compelled) men to join the ranks and stay within them—the usual list of grandiose dreams of fame and fortune, hometown boredom and trouble with the law, and occasional trickery or outright fraud. Brief coverage is also given to what kept them in the ranks, maintaining honor and esprit de corps being the most important. Chapter 6 describes in brief the structures and routines of soldiering—military discipline, seasoning raw recruits into hardened veterans, camp life and its distractions, and another discussion of drill and training. The chapter concludes with a three-page discussion of soldiers living among civilians, and of how veterans survived after their discharge. The seventh chapter broadens the subject even further, looking at European adventures overseas and examining them on each continent separately. Showalter and Astore emphasize the relative weakness of European forces in all of these corners of the globe, and argue that their successes most often lay in their ability either to find native allies or to coopt native forces. Finally, the two-page conclusion returns to the putative subject of the book, the early modern soldier, appealing to modern readers not to judge such men too harshly for their behavior, and to recognize how these soldiers' professional commitments to fight were different from the warrior ethos of an earlier age.

As this summary of chapter contents suggests, the book covers both more and less than what the reader is promised. Given the book's title and its introduction, there is surprisingly little on soldiers, at least if one defines them as the rank and file, in contrast to the officers and commanding generals. Only three of the eight chapters (excluding the brief conclusion) focus directly on the men in the ranks, while one more deals with the officers and commanders. The other chapters, accounting for two-thirds of the page count, deal with broader issues of politics, strategy, technology and tactics, and European conquests overseas. These chapters do an adequate job of summarizing the recent military historiography, though the authors refuse to address the main debates of whether there was a "Military Revolution" or a "Western way of war." Thus these chapters are useful for establishing the broader context, but they do a poor job of connecting their subject matter to the soldiers themselves in any kind of detail. Most striking is the prologue on the triptych of battles, which, while focusing on the "cutting edge" of war, is written with much the same commander-centered focus that John Keegan had criticized over thirty years ago in his 1976 classic, *The Face of Battle*.^[3] The authors' frequent failure to dig deeper into the specialized literature and primary sources also results too often in the resurrection of the anachronistic "universal soldier" evoked in the series' foreword. They should not be criticized too harshly for failing to dig more deeply in a survey like this, but the reader is nonetheless constantly struck by how the soldiers too easily are replaced in the text with the highest elites. For example, in the description of religious motivations in the sixteenth century, the authors' focus is almost exclusively on the kings, rather than on those perpetrating the atrocities for which the period is infamous. There are valid editorial reasons for focusing on topics most thoroughly covered by the secondary literature and for racing through a huge mass of content, but a reader who is promised a look at how soldiers lived, fought, and died expects a bit more detail on the view "from below" than what one gets here.

The book further reflects traditional military history in the authors' modernist outlook—Showalter and Astore are clearly more comfortable in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than the sixteenth and seventeenth. A particularly irritating manifestation of this (irritating for an early modernist, at least) is the frequency with which modern examples are used as shorthand to explain early modern behavior, institutions, and cultures. The cultural references range from M*A*S*H to R. Lee Ermey, the Terminator, *The Lord of the Rings*, gangbangers, and

martial arts magazines. These comparisons may be adequate for the military buff or general reader of military history, but are less acceptable for an academic audience. More fundamentally, Western military historians have, since the age of Napoleon and Carl von Clausewitz, judged war in all periods by how closely its practitioners approached the Napoleonic ideal of decisive battle. Over the past thirty years, this battle-centric focus has been undermined by a number of early modern military historians, yet Showalter and Astore largely ignore the impact of this wide-ranging literature. Instead, the reader is given thirty pages of “vivid” and “exciting” details of three battles, and a dozen pages more on the tactics involved, while the more pedestrian actions of sieges and small war operations get comparatively little coverage. We should add that this is the case even though the authors acknowledge several times that such non-battles were far more common than large-scale field actions. Since Showalter and Astore are experts on military history from the mid-eighteenth century onward, rather than of the early modern period, they are here only mimicking the tendency among some early modern military historians to focus on the view from the commander’s saddle. In so doing, they ignore the most interesting conclusions of the recent historiography.

Overall, this contribution to the Soldiers’ Lives through History series follows the framework outlined by Showalter thirty-three years earlier, put in a broad historical context. The content remains traditional, covering the political context, military technology, training, battles, command, and morale of the militaries of the period. Showalter and Astore have relied heavily on recent English- and German-language military literature, and as a result privilege certain periods and places over others, most frequently spotlighting Sweden in the Thirty Years’ War, France in the age of Louis XIV, and Frederick II’s Prussia. Much more brief are their discussions of topics of interest to a war and society audience, and which would seem to be fundamental to the topic at hand: how

gender informed soldiers’ views of themselves, the motivating role of religion for the troops, soldier interactions with civilians, interactions between the officers and their men, views of the soldiers from the civilian side, and so on. When raised, such subjects usually merit only a few sentences, or a couple of paragraphs at most, in a two-hundred-page book.

Thus in covering such a broad array of topics in such a short amount of space, Showalter and Astore pay less attention to the rank and file than the title suggests, than socially inclined historians might like, and than might be expected given the establishment of war and society throughout academia and given the examples of Keegan and Charles Carlton. The authors acknowledge from the start that theirs is an “episodic and impressionistic” view of the early modern soldier, and this is perhaps the best summation of the work (p. xii).

Notes

[1]. Several works from the 1980s and 1990s summarize much of this literature. See John R. Hale, *War and Society in Renaissance Europe, 1450-1620* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); M. S. Anderson, *War and Society in Europe of the Old Regime, 1618-1789* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988); and Frank Tallett, *War and Society in Early Modern Europe, 1495-1715* (London: Routledge, 1992). The best model is Charles Carlton, *Going to the Wars: The Experience of the British Civil Wars, 1638-1651* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

[2]. Dennis Showalter, “A Modest Plea for Drums and Trumpets,” *Military Affairs* 39 (April 1975): 73.

[3]. This work illustrated the potentially revolutionary nature of a social history of warfare, and wedded traditional military history’s fascination with battle to the insight of soldier agency by arguing that soldiers frequently acted quite differently from what their training and orders commanded of them.

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