

**John A. Lynn II.** *Women, Armies, and Warfare in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. XII, 239 S. \$24.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-72237-7.



**Reviewed by** Eugenia Kiesling

**Published on** H-Minerva (February, 2010)

**Commissioned by** Kara Dixon Vuic (Bridgewater College)

John A. Lynn II has never been a cautious historian. His first monograph, *Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791-94* (1984), overthrew the received wisdom on the French Revolutionary Army as armed horde; his 1997 *Giant of the Grande Siècle: The French Army, 1610-1715* offered the first comprehensive study of the French Army in relationship to the seventeenth-century state; *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* (2003) put paid to the notion of the universal soldier; and now *Women, Armies, and Warfare in Early Modern Europe* presents the “Military Revolution” of the seventeenth century as an episode in women’s history.

The book began as an attempt to fill an important lacuna by exploring the place of women in armies in early modern Europe, and Lynn rightly insists on the importance of that project: “Any attempt to describe early modern warfare without reference to the women who accompanied its armies is doomed to be at best incomplete and, most probably, distorted” (p. 7). The work became,

however, a discussion about women *and* armies. Lynn discovered that, because soldiers sustained themselves through pillage and women were the main pillagers, women were not only useful but essential to the “aggregate contract armies” prevalent before 1650. Moreover, men would not have gone to war without the promise of sexual opportunities. Thus, Lynn recasts the old adage *pas d’argent, pas de Suisse* (“no money, no Swiss”), as “*keine Frauen, keine Deutschen*” (“no women, no Germans”) (p. 221).

Never favored by the pillaged, pillage fell from more general favor in the mid-seventeenth century. The new absolutist states decided that providing regular supplies was less onerous than the destruction and ill-discipline resulting from the logistics by depredation. Armies that did not pillage needed far fewer women, though laundry and nursing remained women’s roles. Moreover, the new state commission armies were larger than the aggregate contract armies, and official logistical mechanisms could not support women in the traditional proportion. The answer to Lynn’s

fundamental question, why did the percentage of female camp followers decline so precipitously from about 1650, is that women's now unwanted pillaging activity led to their displacement from the campaign community. They were thus partially responsible for the shift to a new state commission army and for the growth of the centralized early modern state.

Lynn's argument that "formidable" women were agents in the creation of early modern states requires bold leaps from meager evidence (p. 231). Exemplifying his enthusiasm is his introduction of a young couple, Hans the cobbler and Ursula the spinner, depicted going off to war on a sixteenth-century woodcut. Lynn sees Ursula's pack as symbolic of her role as Hans's "mule" and emphasizes that she will need "strength, endurance, and courage" to survive (pp. 15, 17). But have we any reason to believe that this imaginary Ursula has these qualities? The neat little pack is part of the young woman's impractical attire—gaily flowered bonnet, skirts, dainty shoes, and slender walking stick, while Hans's martial attire seems a bit grand for a (failed?) cobbler abandoning his last. Lynn acknowledges that the "plebian couple" will probably be disappointed of riches, but perhaps the artist's romanticized vision of military life is as much a stereotype as are Lynn's assumptions about Ursula's strength and courage (p. 15). Lynn's insistence that Ursula's role as a pillager rendered her "as important to Hans's survival as his weapons" is suggestive of the extravagance of his argument (pp. 15-16). One can agree that armies as a whole depended on women without believing that every Hans had his personal female combat service support element.

Lynn's honest discussion of sex as key motivator for soldiers is praiseworthy, but the insistence on the "libertine lifestyle of the campaign community" seems off key (p. 41). Contemporary woodcuts may depict the soldiers' excesses, but hard living was surely the norm. If army life was such a party, why was recruiting so difficult? Alcohol

and sex were important to soldiers, but the word "libertine" raises all sorts of issues, especially when applied to a functional community. The "May marriages" intended to last for a campaign season suggest some concern for stability. Lynn must be closer to the mark when he refers to disapproval by "moralists" of "the libertine life soldiers were thought to enjoy" (p. 73).

Pivotal to the argument is the chapter on women's work, which insists that armies needed women because sewing and laundering clothes violated manly dignity. Included in women's work was pillaging, which Lynn calls "the most essential role of women in support of early modern armies" (p. 159). Lynn does not explore why contemporary sailors not only cooked (a role acceptable for men) but also made, repaired, and washed clothing. It is worth asking whether armies without women could have pillaged at least as effectively as navies managed to do laundry. Lynn does, however, address the tension between women's role as pillagers and the violence against women that naturally accompanied the pillage of property. Lynn's brief survey of the possible responses of the soldiers' women to the rape of "their civilian sisters" suggests ways that military and women's history part company. Military history does not see women as sharing a sense of sisterhood while many women's historians will be uncomfortable with the argument that women would think rape appropriate treatment of "remote and hostile others" (p. 156). Historians of both sorts will be troubled that Lynn offers no examples to support his speculative answer to this fraught question.

Lynn is right that military historians have paid too little attention to women's essential functions in the integrated early modern "campaign community." He offers interesting observations about the armies' conflicted responses to female presence, noting that societies that relied on women to satisfy the soldiers' sexual and logistical needs also decried the moral contamination and

venereal disease associated with their presence in camp. In general, the further Lynn moves from the nuts and bolts of military logistics to assessing gender roles, the more speculative the argument. For example, it may be true that the masculine traits required of women for survival on campaign made them natural victims of violence by soldiers determined to affirm gender norms, but how is one to know?

Just as men became soldiers for many reasons, often regretted the decision, and varied in their suitability for warfare, one cannot attribute a set of personal qualities to all camp women. Moreover, the challenges of camp life would not have been so different from those experienced by women in towns and villages, especially those pillaged by the women of the campaign community. One can completely agree with Lynn's insistence on the continued prevalence of "strong, open, and advertised sexuality in military service" and still wince at the contemporary books he chooses to illustrate the point, both of which reflect as much sensitivity to modern literary culture, the nature of the paperback market, and the possibility of film rights as to the psychological dynamics of military life (p. 126,35).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-minerva>

**Citation:** Eugenia Kiesling. Review of Lynn II, John A. *Women, Armies, and Warfare in Early Modern Europe*. H-Minerva, H-Net Reviews. February, 2010.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24468>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.