

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marjolein 't Hart. *The Dutch Wars of Independence: Warfare and Commerce in the Netherlands, 1570-1680*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014. 248 pp. \$49.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-20967-1.

Lauro Martines. *Furies: War in Europe, 1450-1700*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013. 336 pp. \$28.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-60819-609-8.

Reviewed by Robert Tiegs (Louisiana State University)

Published on H-War (July, 2016)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



New Perspectives on Early Modern Warfare

Furies and *The Dutch Wars of Independence* are a historiographer's dream: two works which cover the exact same topic yet offer entirely contradictory arguments. In the former work Lauro Martines paints a vivid picture of uncontrolled armies wreaking havoc and devastation throughout Europe in the early modern period. He introduces the reader to armies that are living at the edges of subsistence, with soldiers struggling for survival and beholden to little authority. Conversely, in the latter monograph, Marjolein 't Hart discusses the increasing professionalization of the Dutch Republic's military during the same time frame. She portrays a disciplined and orderly army with regularized payments for garrison troops and relatively harmonious relations between the military and the citizenry. These opposing interpretations of warfare in this period raise some obvious questions: can both of these views on early modern warfare be accurate, and if is so, how can one account for the differences? Before answering these questions, however, it is best to provide a more complete summary of each historian's argument.

In *Furies* Martines seeks to address the effects of Total War (not a twentieth-century innovation in his view) on the "little people" of Europe. He argues that this bottom-up approach is a necessary corrective as the history of war has focused too much on politics and high diplomacy. As such, his work is full of gruesome detail: cut-off noses, quartering, and the elimination of "use-

less mouths" during sieges that used up limited food supplies. The fact that the book with begins an account of female camp followers pushed from a bridge to allow easier traversing for the military is indicative of the tone for the entire work.

Martines lays the blame for this anguish at the feet of the monarchy, aristocracy, and other leaders of the period. He asserts these individuals knowingly and enthusiastically engaged in wars which they could not afford. There was a strange paradox in which states were able to raise massive armies while simultaneously suffering from financial black holes. In many ways the monetary costs were paid for with human suffering, as the breakdown in nearly every stage of army recruitment and supply passed down the socioeconomic ladder. Monarchs often negotiated troop recruitment and supply contracts with nobility that were underfunded. Both parties agreed because of the mutual benefit. The nobility acquiesced, knowing they could pocket a portion of the money and have the soldiers live off the land, while the monarch had to pay less up front. The creation of these armies fell hardest on the poorer and marginalized sectors of society. Recruiters targeted the "undesirables" in communities and forced them into service with all manner of trickery and deceit. The often unwilling soldiers then received wages below that of the poorest farmers, when they were paid at all. Those who resisted received

brutal reprisals, such as Peter the Great's policy of burning a cross into a deserter's flesh and rubbing gunpowder in the wounds.

The actual fighting was even worse. It was difficult to feed the massive armies, which only brought out the worst in humanity. The armies in which these soldiers fought were often larger than most cities (p. 142) and some had supply trains that could stretch 198 miles (p. 157)! Despite the enormity of this wagon train it was nearly impossible to feed everyone, and the soldiers were often starving as much as the local peasants who unwillingly gave them quarters. Sieges, the most common approach to war in this period, engendered untold hardship and cruelty. There are numerous accounts of "useless mouths" being forced out of a besieged city in order to preserve food supplies, only to be either killed or turned back by the besieging army. Many of them simply died of starvation in the no man's land between the walls and the attacking forces. In short, war was hell.

't Hart, conversely, seeks to answer the question of why war was ruinous for other states, but not the Dutch Republic. She argues that the economic benefits from the wars of independence were due to an early example of the commercialization of warfare. The core of her argument revolves around a forgotten aspect of the Military Revolution: discipline. She contends that the Dutch Revolt accelerated the already expanding Holland economy. Significantly, the Dutch found ways to pay for the war through public finance, which made it easier to collect the necessary funds. The urban elites and those who were taxed had representation in the provincial assembly, the States of Holland, and thus had a say over the level of taxation and how the monies would be spent. This "mutual consent" meant that many of the tax payers were willing supporters of war, unlike in other parts of Europe, where individuals either evaded taxes or local elites supported tax riots.

The leaders of the newly formed Dutch Republic such as Prince William of Orange and Johan van Oldenbarnevelt found ways to instill discipline at various levels of the military. These included innovations not just at the tactical level, with volley fire and the countermarch, but also in salary and provisioning. The power of the purse strings proved vital to the developments of the republic's military. The regularized pay meant that journeymen, apprentices, and farmers and laborers largely filled the ranks of the military. The regularized pay for soldiers not only limited violence between garrisons and the civilians who housed them, but actually pumped money back

into the local economy through the purchase of goods and services. 't Hart contends that these events constituted a revolution in discipline, occurring in the space of two decades which took the rest of Europe much longer.

Returning to the original question of whether these two interpretations of early modern warfare are reconcilable, the answer is yes. Both works provide an accurate and in-depth account of the logistics, tactics, and character of war in the early modern period. Despite the seeming contrary nature of these arguments the two works actually support each other to a considerable degree. The two biggest areas of agreement revolve around financing and the motivations for war. The differences in each account can be explained by the geographic focus of each work and the sources.

The financial differences between the Dutch Republic and the rest of Europe are well known, and in some ways these works are another iteration of the well-known Crisis of the Seventeenth Century debate. The key factor that these two scholars highlight in this regard is how states funded their wars. Both note that the republic managed to establish a secure and reliable public debt. According to Martines this was the more ideal situation as it forced the citizens/subjects to support the state and invest in it. As he points out, however, this situation rarely occurred, and most often war finances benefited an individual party other than the state and its citizens. In many cases, the privatization of tax collection and the sale of those offices meant that many individuals were caught between supporting the state and milking it. Thus the bankers, bureaucrats, and other intermediaries stood to profit handsomely from war. Both Cardinal Richelieu and Mazarin retired with enormous riches derived from corrupt financial practices, while the Medici family began their rise to power by financing Florence's "insane" war with Lucca (p. 235).

The Dutch Republic, conversely, had better regulated and more orderly tax systems which allowed it to commercialize warfare. As 't Hart points out, the republic had a number of institutions and practices which promoted investment in the state and its wars. She notes, "In return for reasonable and predictable taxes the traders and entrepreneurs in Holland [the most important province of the republic] received adequate territorial protection with all its advantages *plus* unequaled financial services *plus* a colonial trade network" (p. 6). In other words, the republic made investing in the state an appealing opportunity. Up to 1648 even people and organizations of modest means could purchase bonds that supported the

war effort and earn a return on their investment. These bonds also had positive redistributive effects. For instance, nearly 10 percent of the bonds issued in the town of Gorinchem in Holland were owned by charitable institutions, which increased their ability to provide aid (pp. 160-161). Beyond the possibility of profit, the Dutch were also very willing to pay their taxes and purchase these bonds because it reduced the threat of mutiny and plunder. The stability of the financial systems in the republic meant that it enjoyed a high creditworthiness and could maintain a low interest rate on its public debt. In short, for the majority of Europe individuals benefited from war, while in the republic war served the public to a greater degree.

The second point of agreement involved the state's motivations for war. As 't Hart notes the Dutch fought their wars in this period, not for aggrandizement, but largely for defense and protection. The few offensive campaigns, mostly in the colonial setting, were fought for the expansion of trade and prosperity. Other states and rulers were not as reserved. Martines notes that early modern princes drew their lineage from medieval warlords and thugs, which fueled foreign relations. He makes a convincing argument that the political theories of the early modern era, such as reason of state, balance of power, and the importance of dynastic lineages were all just the intellectualizing of the more the basic premise that "might makes right."

In many ways these two different approaches to war highlight the divergent trajectories of early modern warfare. The combat depicted by Martines finds its roots in the Middle Ages. Rulers, concerned with chivalric notions and territorial acquisition, organized an army and took it into the field knowing full well they could not support it. They privatized the logistical and financial offices to individuals at the expense of the lower orders of society. The commercialization of warfare, as discussed by 't Hart, was the way forward for most of Europe. She observes that the leaders of the Dutch Republic knew how to make money from organized violence. She notes how self-control and discipline within the military took the place of martial virtue. The developments in the republic were not lost on contemporaries, but they were slow to react, and it was not until the eighteenth century that other European states began emulating the Dutch example.

The difference between these two works can be explained by the different geographic focus and the sources used for each. Martines examines warfare throughout Europe in the early modern period, of which the Dutch Republic was often an exception to the generalized rules. Understanding the reason for this deviation is the whole premise of 't Hart's work. Martines even notes the unique examples of the republic, discussing how its finances remained stable despite war expenditures and debt ratios similar to other states and how different cities in Holland profited from the specialized production of standardized weaponry. In short, the Dutch Republic was the exception to the rule in seventeenth-century Europe.

The different sources used for each work and can also help explain the different views. Martines bases a large portion of his argument on chronicles and firsthand accounts of the fighting. He does nothing to downplay or sidestep the ghastly details, but rather presents them to the reader. Conversely, the majority of 't Hart's work is based on secondary sources. Each of these foundations suits the historian's rhetorical objective. 't Hart is well served by focusing on the existing scholarship to demonstrate the order and discipline within the republic's financial and military spheres. Discussions of gruesome sieges and drawn-out battles, no matter how orderly, would distract the reader from her larger argument. In other words, she appeals to the reader's analytical side, offering a more detached account. To be fair though, she does discuss the more destructive aspects of fighting in the Netherlands, such as the military inundations which devastated the landscape for years and the scorched-earth tactics which completely destroyed several villages. Martines's work invokes a more visceral reaction, drawing on the reader's emotional side. The value of this approach is seen in his afterword, when he invites scholars to hold early modern rulers accountable for their actions. This bottom-up history, focusing on the villagers and common soldiers, offers a welcome addition to military history. The elites of the early modern period have told their stories, crafting narratives of dynastic struggles and the all-important balance of power, and historians have largely listened to these tales. Perhaps it is time to listen to the more marginalized voices of society when evaluating the complex relationship between warfare and society.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Robert Tiegs. Review of Hart, Marjolein 't, *The Dutch Wars of Independence: Warfare and Commerce in the Netherlands, 1570-1680* and Martines, Lauro, *Furies: War in Europe, 1450-1700*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. July, 2016.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44366>



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