

*H-France Review* Vol. 10 (March 2010), No. 33

David Potter, *Renaissance France at War. Armies, Culture and Society, c. 1480-1560*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008. xviii + 405 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. \$115 (£60). ISBN 978-1-84383-405-2.

Review by David Parrott, New College, Oxford.

A series of books and articles by David Potter over the last two decades have established him as the leading English-speaking expert on Renaissance French warfare.[1] The present book brings together much of Potter's earlier explorations of French military organization, of war and its impact on society, and on the distinctiveness of a Renaissance military culture, and adds a great deal more to our knowledge of all these fields. It bears the characteristic stamp of Potter's intellectual approach: extensive use of primary manuscript sources, especially from the north-east of France, and familiarity with an extraordinary range of printed contemporary sources. These latter are never far from a discussion which is given depth and contemporary resonance by numerous direct quotations (in translation), and by an ability to get under the skin of the period and to see the culture and organization of Renaissance war through the eyes of the protagonists. Sixteenth-century French nobles, administrators, clergy and scholars wrote a lot about war, and the present work is remarkably successful in offering a rich and detailed overview which makes extensive use of these contemporary voices.

If the book represents a culmination of much of David Potter's earlier scholarship, it also represents another welcome and important stage in a larger process by which the French armies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have been subjected to detailed study. This has remained a largely Anglo-American development, even though in recent years a number of French historians have begun to take an interest in what might still be termed "new" military history—albeit that the study of war in its relationship to government, society and culture is now a well-established and well-represented branch of historical scholarship. In this context Potter's book provides a study of early sixteenth-century French armies that asks the same types of questions that James Wood approached for the armies of the early Civil Wars, John Lynn considered for the seventeenth century armies, the present author attempted to do for the period of Richelieu's ministry, and Guy Rowlands examined for the armies of Louis XIV down to the late 1690's.[2]

The difference here, which realigns the overall focus for the book, is signified by the use of the word "culture" in the title. A third of the book is focused on a detailed examination of the cultural impact of war. This includes a detailed discussion of the way that news of warfare was communicated and presented, how the actions of French arms and foreign policy were understood and interpreted across society, and a survey of art, literature and music celebrating war. The reader is led from a world of war finance, troop numbers, logistics, military organization and discipline, all of which are familiar from this genre of detailed military history, into one which connects more closely with a fast-growing corpus of studies of French courtly and urban celebrations, investigations of public opinion and printed propaganda, and artistic patronage and its political contexts. None of this has been brought together before in a specific study of military culture, and to some extent it will inevitably create two different constituencies for the book. That said, Potter's contribution to the perception and presentation of war

in Renaissance France deserves the attention of military historians for whom “culture” can easily become a synonym for “society.”

What then does the new book bring to our knowledge of armies, warfare and military culture under the French Renaissance monarchy?

Potter’s survey starts at the top of society. The decades from 1490 to 1560 may not be--year-for-year--the most bellicose in French history, but they were certainly ones overwhelmingly dominated by the waging and impact of war. The sequence of monarchs from Charles VIII to Henri II all considered their dynastic responsibility and ambitions, their self-image and their sovereignty, to be intimately linked to the waging of war, often in person. The first two chapters are concerned to explore the justifications for warfare advanced by kings, diplomats and writers, setting these in the context of the political reasons why the long series of wars starting with Charles VIII’s invasion of Italy in 1494 were initiated. Much that was written at the time swathes a series of opportunistic initiatives, enforced responses and calculated gambles in the time-serving cloak of royal honour, protection of weaker states and the defence of universal peace.

Potter does nonetheless show us that a few individuals do break ranks--Blaise de Monluc in his *Commentaires*, for example--to discuss the human and material costs of frivolous dynastic rivalry and ambition. Such dissenting opinions were rarely expressed amongst those who were given command of the armies, or were involved in the planning and preparation of war: the same Monluc describes how he swayed the mood of a Council of War in March 1544 against the “defeatists” who argued against fighting an aggressive, battle-seeking campaign in Italy at the same time as defending north-east France against the invasion of Emperor Charles V (pp. 54-55). Bellicose debate aside, there is plenty of evidence here that the planning, costing and collection of material for wars was carefully assessed and that the state, in the form of the king’s council and the military high command, did see themselves as directly responsible for much of the administration of the army, whether that meant the hiring of mercenaries, the purchasing of transport, or the contracting for provisions and munitions. The latter, as most studies of early modern warfare reveal, represented a colossal element of the total military budget: in 1551 the costs of provisions, transport and the artillery was estimated at three times the costs of actually raising or hiring troops and paying their wages.

The evolution of the army in this period as a fighting force receives detailed attention: the balance of heavy and light cavalry; the role of French infantry versus foreign mercenaries; the development of the artillery into a major arm--and a major expense--in the waging of field campaigns and the ever-more frequent sieges. French nobles’ self-identification with service in the cavalry, and especially the heavy *gendarmarie*, seems to have held the line into the 1540’s and 1550’s against what was the most obvious characteristic of the infantry, the vast expansion in the proportion of foreign mercenaries. The role of mercenaries receives a full chapter, and the historical singularity of a French royal army that by the 1550’s was over 70 percent composed of contracted foreign troops--by then both infantry and cavalry--remains remarkable. As often with discussions of the mercenary phenomenon in early modern armies, the chapter, beyond some references to ‘battle-hardened infantry’ and the flexibility that hiring mercenaries allowed, then presents a detailed litany of every kind of disadvantage seemingly brought by hired soldiers who possessed a strong sense of their collective bargaining power. As Potter himself admits of the Swiss in French service: “such reliance on quasi-independent forces might seem surprising...” (p. 128).

Yet frustratingly we have little here on the mind-set that could only envisage increasing the number of mercenaries despite these problems of pay, discipline, and--as Potter points out--erratic battlefield performance. Was it about prestige, fashion, or simply a conviction that every attempt to create a native French infantry organized on *Landsknecht* principles seemed to have proved a dismal failure? (And in this respect it might have been illuminating to have had more discussion about why the innovation of

the 1530's, François I's infantry 'legions' proved so unsuccessful.) What it may show up, as Potter hints in places, is the embryonic nature of a military administration which relied heavily on the efforts, support and goodwill of regional nobles in recruiting and supporting armies, and on traditional social hierarchies to exercise command and control. Successive French rulers convinced themselves that the threat posed by the dynastic agglomeration of Emperor Charles V's resources could only be met by unparalleled military expansion. The consequent task of raising a military establishment within France that was more or less double that at the beginning of the century was simply beyond the organizational resources of these existing, traditional mechanisms.

Similar underlying questions might be asked about the building of fortifications, one of the great challenges and expenses of this period. The book provides an excellent discussion of the evolution of fortification design in the first decades of the sixteenth century until the emergence of the angle bastions with their characteristic 'ears' (*orillons*), which defined the basic forms of fortification into the age of Vauban and beyond. The process by which key fortifications across France were transformed is well-illustrated with an excellent series of ground-plans. Most of this work was planned and executed by a new generation of Italian engineers, who literally exported the fortification-revolution to the rest of Europe. How autonomous were they in carrying out this work? The signals in the relevant section here are mixed: contracts were clearly drawn up but was the design and the process of construction entirely outsourced under contract to these Italian engineers? If not, just how large a role did a French military administration take in this process?

The sinews of war were of course money, and war finance occupies a prominent role throughout the book, but with a dedicated chapter which details the various hand-to-mouth expedients that kept the military machine operating, the mounting pressure of taxation and, even more significantly, the growing burdens of local requisitioning either in lieu of taxes or as an extra, extraordinary burden. The material here is rich and provides much suggestive detail, some via well-presented graphs interpreting the material of appendices, in an area that is notoriously problematic given misleading accounting and both deliberate and accidental destruction of documentation. A curiously under-interpreted feature of all this evidence is the truly exponential rise in military expenditure in the 1550's. If expenditure was kept reasonably under control—a shallow upward line—from the 1510's to the 1540's, expenditure made through the *extraordinaire des guerres* quintupled by 1553, and sextupled by 1558 (p. 214, pp. 260-263). Even allowing for faulty accounting, the evidence that warfare was entering a new phase of unprecedented expense seems hard to resist. Although Potter reasonably suggests in his introduction that there was no reason why the Habsburg-Valois wars would definitively have ended in 1559 had not France descended into civil war after the accidental death of Henri II, it might well have been a different kind of war. The evidence of both the expenditure in the later 1550's, and the vast rescheduling of debts required by both France and Spain, suggests that war fought on this scale over an unprecedented number of campaigns was simply unsustainable.

How did the French people react to war and its burdens? The chapters on the impact of war, the evidence for dissemination of information and the early signs of a public sphere in which policy might be discussed and debated, necessarily stress diversity of opinion and response. From the various hired pens, or pens who would like to be hired, emerged a wide range of more or less routine or outlandish justifications and defences for the French kings' policies. Underlying much of this, as Potter skilfully brings out via reports of ambassadors, private chronicles and other sources, was a greater sense of unease about the expense of war, and the recklessness with which Christian princes appeared to be ready to drag their states into ever-more destructive combat. The scale of royal justifications and propaganda, through manifestos, ceremonies and the sponsoring of literary justifications, all suggest that the unease was recognized and that, as in so many other aspects of sixteenth-century politics, persuasion was far more important to the crown's authority than threats or the limited possibilities of coercion. The chapter on the arts and war, on the other hand, while pointing to some particular examples of royal commissions glorifying the ruler's role in warfare—coins, medals and ceremonial armour are given due

attention--also indicates the relatively limited use at this stage of these media as tools for military self-presentation. There was little here to prefigure the image of the *roi de guerre*, which Louis XIV's artistic patronage was to bring to its apotheosis in the great stage-set of Versailles.

This is an important and thought-provoking book, which makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of numerous aspects of early modern warfare. It is a pleasure to see the book's dedication to Robert Knecht, a worthy tribute to a historian who has done more than any other to bring together the political and cultural dimensions of the French Renaissance monarchy.

## NOTES

[1] Potter, *War and Government in the French Provinces: Picardy, 1470-1560* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); *A History of France, 1460-1560. The Emergence of a Nation State* (Macmillan: London, 1995); Potter, ed., *Un homme de guerre au temps de la Renaissance. La vie et les lettres d'Oudart du Biez, Maréchal de France, Gouverneur de Boulogne et de Picardie* (Artois Presses Université: Arras, 2001), and numerous articles.

[2] J. B. Wood, *The King's Army. Warfare, soldiers and society during the Wars of Religion in France, 1562-76* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); J.A. Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle. The French Army, 1610-1715* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); D. A. Parrott, *Richelieu's Army. War, Government and Society in France, 1624-42* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), G. Rowlands, *The dynastic state and the Army under Louis XIV: royal service and private interest, 1661-1701*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[3] pp. 54-55.

[4] p. 128.

[5] p. 214, pp. 360-363.

David Parrott  
New College, Oxford  
david.parrott@new.ox.ac.uk

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172