HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

# **WESTERN EUROPEAN HISTORY** – Military

**Contents**



## ANCIENT PERIOD

Fighting, not warfare, is what we see in Western Europe in antiquity. If we are speaking of the Roman provinces that are today's England, France, and Germany, especially on the cusp of the Christian era, at the beginning of the Roman Empire, we are talking about tribes with a capacity for iron-ware fighting equipment, for hand held military weaponry, for chariot fighting, as they would have known it from their relative proximity to the Roman heartland, and quite possibly from conscription into the Roman army. We are not, however, talking about organized military groups, strategic planning, or a military administration. Much of the time we are talking about local conflicts over territory and food. The tribal names blur in our minds.

## POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

**Overview** Throughout the post classical period in Europe, the Middle Ages, there was a slowly growing development of larger and more coherent social units; not yet states in the modern sense, even at the end of the postclassical period, but coherent language and culture units which resembled the states to be of France, Italy, Spain, England, and Germany. As these coherent units grew, representing as they did coagulations of capital and assets--as in the powerful centers of Feudalism--it became increasingly necessary to provide effective defense machineries for centers of settlement, just as, in the late Mediaeval period, hungry and aggressive nomadic groups--the Magyars, the Huns, the Mongols, the Vikings--staged frequent aggressions against settled communities, thus helping to hone the arts of attack machinery.

**Warfare in Theory** The military textbook of prime importance, throughout the post classical period, was Vegetius Renatus' *De Re Militari*, *On Military Affairs*, composed in the 4th century C.E. On the whole--and this betrays the lag time between theory and the growing practice of the period--Renatus formulates a guidebook for successful military practice. He recommends that the infantry be considered the core of the army, and that generals should initiate battle only when they are sure of winning. Pitched battles were to be discouraged, and were in fact rare. In the Middle Ages. This textbook, influential still in the fifteenth century, though long supplanted by skills and materials on the ground, was still being ordered into translation by Henry VII of England, in the fifteenth century--evidence of the distance theory was behind both the growing technologies of defensive and proactive warfare.

**Defensive warfare** The evolution of walled cities, in the post classical period, made for styles of warfare sharply different from those in the Greco-Roman period. Against invaders it was important to oppose the most impregnable possible defense, which was becoming the *castle.* Throughout Europe castles sprang up wherever there was a considerable Feudal community, and with time these castles became harder to breach. The best engineers of the times were recruited for castle construction, and made regular advances in such technologies as drawbridge construction, the creation of heavily fortified walls, the assurance of a long term fresh water supply within the castle precinct, the construction of hidden wall slits

for arrow or crossbow shooting, and the perfection of the resources needed for pouring down cascades of boiling water or hot lava on the heads of the enemy.

**Siege warfare** The obverse of defensive warfare, of course, was siege warfare, the most common form of organized military aggression in the post classical period. This kind of assault procedure demanded money, time, and expertise, just as did the defensive strategies of the castle. New devices were invented for scaling castle walls, for battering foundations, for hurling catapults, and, In the final centuries of the post classical period in Europe, for employing cannon and gunpowder, with increasing accuracy and effect. While the initial introduction of gunpowder into Europe can be credited to Mongols working from China, by the fifteenth century European gunpowder manufacture was well developed on its own.

**Recruiting and soldiery** The manpower behind the above warfare forms was throughout the Mediaeval period recruited along lines dictated by the social agencies involved. For a long time there survived the ancient Greco Roman practice by which citizens saw to their own arming, and considered it part of their individual duties to prepare for and enter into the military actions of the community. This involved considerable outlays of personal expenditure for armor, a practice which survived at many points in the Middle Ages, when knights supplied themselves and their feudal retinues with armor and cavalry for a large number of supporters. There were at the same time, throughout the later Middle Ages, occasions on which ever larger communities, small cities, found themselves obliged to finance standing armies, as supports for the entire community.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

**Soldiers.** The evolution of the proto modern state, after the transition from the late Middle Ages, with its first steps toward urbanization and an external economy in touch with distant markets, inevitably brings along with it changes in the way new social arrangements protect themselves. During the course of mediaeval military formation, the widespread role of armored knight and cavalry became increasingly incorporated into that of soldier, both citizen soldier and mercenary, the soldier for pay whom we will see prominently, in the service of states and wealthy principalities, especially during the first half of the early modern period.

**Navy.** In addition to such groupings of soldiers, armies in construction, there was much stress—say in the Franco English Wars--on the exercise of sea power for military protection purposes. As certain navies, like the British and Spanish, became key elements of international economics and foreign policy, the role of ships and sailors gained prominence. The Royal Navy was ,throughout the three hundred year period before us, an example of an effective force, indispensable to its mother land, in which the latest in evolving post mediaeval marine technology—120 gunnery emplacements per vessel, copper sheathing for boats' bottoms, facilities for long term food preservation—made life on these floating homes tolerably comfortable, and combat with them maximally dangerous.

**Sieges.** If any innovation drove the increasing frequency and potency of major wars, in the complex period of European history before us, it will be the ever evolving sophistication of gun powder and gunfire. The Chinese invention of gunpowder, which that nation was relatively slow to use for military purposes—a millennium at least, before lethal military operations, in China, were to employ serious use of powder firing weapons. In the western transition, from High Middle Ages into early modern warfare techniques, we find that gunpowder and appropriate firing weapons have seriously changed the game of states. By the seventeenth century, mobile siege engines were employed by monarchs like Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden, to undertake (usually successfully) prolonged assaults on enemy fortifications. It was no longer a question of ladder scaling, or thrown catapults, nor was it a question of tall circular castles to wear down, but rather an issue of firing arquebuses or flintlock muskets into low walled, often polygonal or star shaped fortifications, such as studded the newer European landscape through the eighteenth century.

**Skirmishes**. Both infantry and cavalry were involved in frequent skirmishes, during the second half of the Early Modern Period. One could see, in these death struggles among citizen militias and mercenaries, in the fight for this or that small city state, new fighting styles thrown into action;; while in the l5th century we saw the use of the arquebus and crossbow , which were to be replaced by the bayonet (after l650) and the flintlock musket (after 1650), which could (with some degree of accuracy) penetrate steel armor at one hundred yards distance. This fact should prepare us for the general discovery, that by the end of the Early Modern Period wars were growing increasingly lethal, involving many more men and vastly more potent weapons.

**Armies**. Armies, as we know well from observing today's nations' annual budgets, eat up a great deal of the income of a city state or state. By the end of the pre modern period it was common for modern states and mega communities to make extensive bank loans from the Central Banks increasingly crucial to the growth and security of individual polities. This strategy of self-protection for the larger corporate social entity puts us within shouting distance of the contemporary state, which co-exists with its army, and recovers through citizen taxes the costs of 'protecting itself.'

## 19TH CENTURY

**Peace.** We wonder at a l9th century Europe, which, following on the early modern network of intricate military alliances, military religious-struggles, and dynastic rivalries, with in conclusion the turbulent Napoleonic Wars, managed to characterize itself as the century of peace, the 'long nineteenth century.' It is in fact not before the reign of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, and the powerful Prussian alliances in the last third of the century—cf. The Austro German Alliance of 1879—that the horizon begins to darken with the war clouds that will become a thunderstorm by the thirties of the following century. There is a steady advance of military technology—paralleling the growing European globalization and trade superiority of the century—which reflects in an advance of details, and which will make its damaging face clear in the following century; advances in naval and fire power led the way:

*Steel superseded wooden hulls on ships of the line; battleships like HMS Dreadnought made their competitors obsolete, with turbine engines, ten to twelve inch guns, and techniques for harnessing steam power which grew exponentially.*

*Breech loading cannon, with rifled steel barrels, replaced muzzle loaders. Infantry rifles replaced muskets, which were slow to load, and inaccurate.*

*Smokeless high explosives replaced powder in bullets; the modern field gun fired 20 rounds per minute.*

*On the level of military logistics, the western European world was as a whole taken by the model established by Chancellor Bismarck for the second Prussian Empire. Universal conscription, and mastery of the railways for military mobilization, were brought to new levels of fight-ready efficiency.*

## 20TH CENTURY

**Trenches.** Wars and the technology of war proliferated in the twentieth century. There were many wars in the century, and with each, especially toward the end of the century, the 'experts' learned more about how to use their weapons. While in the earlier wars of the century, notably the First World War, technology honed in on making trench warfare more endurable and impregnable--improvement in machine guns and artillery--and on the development of nerve gasses, the latter part of the century, the period of the atom and nuclear bombs, was the era of physics.

**Bombs.** In the latter period, both in Britain and the United States, whose experts were in close collaboration, emphasis was placed on the destructive powers of atomic and nuclear weaponry, with vast destructive powers, as the world saw at Nagasaki. The desired result, of the concentrated scientific effort at defeating the enemy, was the huge number of deaths which resulted from the century's wars:. Samples: WW I 20 million deaths; WW II. 62-78 million dead; influenza epidemic in the United States, brought back by returning GI's after WW II, 50 million dead.

**Proliferation.** As the hardware of war grew harder, more readily available, and more conveniently packaged inside the marketing system, of the military industrial complex, the number of wars dominating the globe—and some in Western Europe—increased; the two World Wars were unprecedented to their date in casualties and brutality to the civilian population; the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and the French War in Algeria (1954-1962) were both notorious for ferocity. It was as though the appetite for global war simply whetted the taste for war in general, which—though not all in western Europe—was multiplying across the globe, involving the West with Vietnam, Korea, and China. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were made possible by international efforts involving the top scientists of post war England and Germany.

**Why?** Why was there so much active warfare in twentieth century Europe—so much more than in the previous century, and so much more devastating than at any time in human history? How was it possible that western European (and global) man would wish to inflict on himself the increasingly devastating damage of modern war? Is it that man does not pose that entire question to himself? That he thinks first of all on what he needs, or wants, or dreads, and that he tries to interpret his actions later, after the war(s), if at all? And that by that time our fellow men and women lie dead on all aides of us? In retrospect we will tot up our losses and gains, lick our wounds while we justify our behaviors, and, now, because we have inextricably entangled ourselves with one another, as nation states, we will start settling down to compromise with one another, and to see how we can turn the other's needs to our advantage.

**Readings**

Black, Jeremy: *Beyond the Military Revolution: War in the Seventeenth Century World*, (Basingstoke 2011)

DeVries, Kelly, *Mediaeval Military Technology* (Peterborough, 1992)

Donagan, Barbara, *War in England: 1642–1649*, (Oxford 2008)

Nicholson, Helen, *Mediaeval Warfare: Theory and Practice of War In Europe, 300-1500* (Basingstoke, 2004)

Parker, Geoffrey*: The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West: 1500-1800* (Cambridge, l996).

Rodger, Nicholas, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain 1649-1815* (London, 2004).

Tallett, Frank*, War and Society in early Modern Europe, 1495-1715* (London, l992)

Wilson, Peter: *Europe's Tragedy: A History of the Thirty Years War* (London, 2009)

**Discussion questions**

What do you see as the origin of warfare? Is it an effort of the clan to protect itself? An effort to take over other clans' territory or women or wealth?

Was there large scale warfare in the Middle Ages? Were there any armies, in the contemporary sense, in that long period of a millennium, when cities were only beginning to be reestablished, after the breakdown of the Roman Empire?

How long did sieges of individual castles last? What kinds of preparation did the besieged citizens have to make, for prolonged survival inside castle walls?

What was the effect of the introduction of gunpowder into Feudal society? What effect did it have on city planning and defensive protection?

What was the source of funding for the prolonged sieges and intracity battles that marked the Early Modern Era? What role did banks play in these conflicts?

What was the role of the clergy, during the repeated military actions of the Middle Ages in Europe? Was there protest against warfare?

Does twenty first century warfare differ significantly from that of the twentieth century? What new technological directions do you see, in the warfare of our day?