Denton on Sandberg, 'War and Conflict in the Early Modern World, 1500-1700'

Review published on Thursday, August 1, 2019


Reviewed by Chad Denton (Independent Scholar) Published on H-War (August, 2019) Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)


Writing a historical survey is a daunting task, more so when the subject matter is as broad as war and conflict in general. For that alone, I commend Brian Sandberg for writing a monograph as ambitious in scope as War and Conflict in the Early Modern World. Even chronologically limited to the two centuries between 1500 and 1700, the book is not even primarily a military history but aims to encompass a multitude of topics falling under the rubric of “conflict,” including rebellions, ethnic and religious conflict, civil and social unrest, and hostilities between colonizers and indigenous populations.

Focusing on what he defines as “organized armed violence,” Sandberg’s goal is to present a comprehensive global history that treats military violence as a tool not just of states but also of diverse individuals and organizations (p. xi). His chronological focus on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was chosen due to the period’s dramatic shifts in the history of conflict and war. The year 1500 sees the beginning of the first wave of European colonization and the extensive integration of firearm technology into regular combat. Meanwhile the dawn of the eighteenth century is an ideal end point because it was an era that was experiencing another significant shift with the decline of religious motives for war and the rise of professional standing armies. These changes, Sandberg suggests, were driven across Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Africa by a plethora of factors, including technological change, the rise of highly bureaucratized empires, globalization through colonization and growing trade encounters, and environmental change.

This thesis does lead Sandberg to exclude Australia and Oceania, which does undermine his project being truly “global,” but it is also difficult to see how these regions that were still largely isolated from the Americas and Eurasia could have been cleanly incorporated into his narrative. Another limitation that Sandberg admits to is that his research specialization is in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century France and Italy, hence his reliance on secondary sources for some subjects. Again, this is an understandable limitation, which could also explain why the book’s exploration of certain regions like Japan and the Amerindians of North America is relatively cursory.

Where War and Conflict in the Early Modern World is most interesting is how he attempts to develop alternatives to Geoffrey Parker’s thesis of an early modern military revolution by incorporating non-European models and “alternative global trajectories” and where he challenges the traditional
historical narrative of the expansionist and dynamic “West” and the passive and stagnant “everyone else” (p. 7). This is illustrated in Sandberg’s overview of the development of new military strategies updating cavalry units in the Middle East, West Africa, and elsewhere; Ottoman naval ambitions for the Indian Ocean; and the role of Theravada Buddhism in imperial, expansionist ideologies in modern-day Thailand. Even when discussing the “West,” Sandberg makes intriguing points about how climate change and the growing size of European armies changed peasant resistance.

That said, Sandberg does not always address how the topics he details fit the analysis he proposes in his introduction. Sandberg’s chapters on dynastic consolidation and rivalry and noble violence read as discussions of examples rather than comparative analysis. For instance, how did dynasties “articulat[ing] various principles of authority through their courts and ceremonies” or the dynastic conflicts between the Valois and the Hapsburgs and Safavids and the House of Osman represent a change with earlier trends (p. 105)? Or what similarities and interconnected influences affected the daimyo in Japan as well as the warrior nobles of the Mughal Empire and elsewhere?

While there are valuable examples of how the early modern developments of globalization, technological change, and growing state power affected conflict and violence, in general, the types of conflict that prevailed in the early modern era are more obvious than exactly what “overlapping processes transformed the nature of war and conflict in the early modern world” (p. 4). There are also historical errors in the narrative, such as misnaming Sultan Mehmed III of the Ottoman Empire as the more famous Mehmed II and mistakenly describing Catherine de’ Medici as the queen regent for her son François II, not Charles IX (pp. 240, 143).

While there are errors and segments where the narrative reads more as summary than analysis, War and Conflict in the Early Modern World nonetheless fills an important niche in the categories of both early modern world histories and military histories that extend beyond the topics of military tactics and technology.


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