Sandberg on Parrott, 'The Business of War: Military Enterprise and Military Revolution in Early Modern Europe'

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Reviewed by Brian Sandberg (Northern Illinois University) Published on H-War (July, 2020) Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)


Private military companies (PMCs) and private military firms (PMFs), such as Blackwater USA, Dyncorp, and Kellogg Brown and Root, have become integral to twenty-first-century warfare. Until recently, military historians have tended to focus on nation-states and their permanent military forces, largely ignoring the roles that private contractors have played in military operations and logistics. The dramatic rise of Blackwater USA and other PMCs in organizing and fighting the Iraq War and Afghan War has prompted some researchers to rethink the private-public relations in the waging of war. Notably, defense analyst P. W. Singer has sketched out a “privatized military history” as basis of his study of modern PMFs and political scientist Sarah Percy has traced the historical norms of states’ employment of mercenaries.[1]

David Parrott’s The Business of War: Military Enterprise and Military Revolution in Early Modern Europe responds to these new concerns with private military activity by presenting a history of “the rise, success and transformations of military enterprise—warfare organized and waged by private contractors—in early modern Europe” (p. 1). This historical perspective is especially useful since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are often described as the golden age of mercenaries and military entrepreneurs. Parrott directly interrogates the concept of “mercenaries” by problematizing the linked notions of service for pay and foreignness as defining “mercenary” soldiers and distinguishing them from other military forces (pp. 29-30).

The Business of War offers a provocative examination of numerous varieties of military enterprise in the early modern period. After briefly describing the Italian condottieri of the late medieval period, Parrott focuses on the contracting of Swiss Haufen (infantry bands) and German Landsknecht units in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. He relates these forms of military contracting to the leasing and arming of individual merchant ships and entire galley squadrons during wartime. The development of galleons, which could operate as armed merchant ships or dedicated warships over extended periods of time, may have provided a new model for military enterprise on land toward the end of the sixteenth century. Parrott asserts that “the shift from the mercenary-commanders of the sixteenth century to the enterpriser-creditors of the seventeenth saw a transformation in the potential for profit in proportion to the much higher levels of capital investment involved” (p. 241).

Parrott questions the nature of the military transformations in the early modern period, challenging
military modernization and state development narratives. Where Michael Roberts and Geoffrey Parker have portrayed the development of infantry drill in the early seventeenth century as ushering in permanent armies, Parrott finds that armies that adopted drill for their conscripted militia infantry failed miserably. Instead of adopting permanent armies, he argues, most states instead opted for new contracted military units: “the way lay open, wide and straight, to the triumph of military contracting” in the mid-seventeenth century (p. 100).

The Thirty Years’ War (1618-48) sits at the heart of The Business of War, but in surprising ways. Parrott directly challenges conventional interpretations of the war that portray Albrecht von Wallenstein as the epitome of military contracting and that see a decline in military enterprise following his demise. The book surveys the military systems of the Thirty Years’ War, stressing the diverse forms of military contracting employed by the military enterprisers and states. Parrott credits long wars and perpetual campaigning (even in winters) for gradually altering patterns of military administration, resource mobilization, and war finance. The book examines army commanders’ personal credit mechanisms and their partnerships with financier-suppliers during the Thirty Years’ War. Wallenstein emerges as an exceptional figure, who managed to create a partially “industrialized” arms manufacturing center in his duchy of Friedland, which “might be seen as an early example of a ‘military-industrial complex,’” according to Parrott (pp. 235-36).

Parrott’s methodology challenges state-development models of the rise of the modern state as coterminous with the emergence of permanent armies. Indeed, he argues that different varieties of private military contracting have long constituted the normal means of organizing military forces in most European states. Parrott asserts that “the maintenance of wholly state-recruited and state-administered military force is an anomalous development over the broader course of European history” (p. 2). Negative stereotypes of “mercenaries” emerged from early modern moralistic literature and then were reinforced by state-building historians of the nineteenth century. Rather than seeing the seventeenth century as a moment of the emergence of “modern” states and military organizations, this book stresses continuities in state development and military organization (p. 21).

The book’s sources necessarily rely heavily on recent works in the fields of military history, war and society studies, and state development history, as well as specialized monographs and journal articles on “mercenaries.” As a specialist in military administration in the French army during the Thirty Years’ War, Parrott also draws on his deep reading of archival sources on seventeenth-century military organizations and administrative practices. Indeed, this book represents a logical outgrowth of Parrott’s landmark study, Richelieu’s Army: War, Government and Society in France, 1624-42 (2001). The Business of War offers an extended reply to Fritz Redlich’s classic two-volume study of German military enterprisers, The German Military Enterpriser and His Work Force, 14th to 18th Centuries (1964). Redlich’s work has also helped shape the research of historians who have begun to revisit early modern mercenaries and warfare in light of the rise of PMCs.[2] This allows Parrott to build on recent work on military entrepreneurs in early modern Europe, some of which was showcased at a major international conference on the “capitalization” of early modern warfare.[3]

A sustained critique of the Military Revolution debate clearly lies behind The Business of War’s agenda. Parrott has previously criticized the concept of the Military Revolution and its military explanation of the rise of the modern state, but this book establishes an entirely different causation for the military transformations of early modern warfare. Parrott argues that “much more than
technological or tactical developments, it is arguable that the lengthening of periods of continuous warfare—a process which started in the 1550s, progressed through the later sixteenth century and culminated in the Thirty Years War—was the key early modern ‘revolution in military affairs’, the single transformative factor which had a major impact on the entire conduct of warfare” (p. 76).

The Business of War also seriously challenges modernizing narratives of royal absolutism and bureaucratic state development. After the Thirty Years’ War, “a more explicit level of direct control of armies and navies does emerge,” according to Parrott, and yet “the extent of this assertion of the direct power of the state over its armed force should not be exaggerated” (p. 261). Parrott stresses the persistence of military contracting throughout the seventeenth century, as new forms of public-private military partnerships emerged. Parrott does see a significant shift around 1660, signaled by a decline in army commanders’ military contracting and the disappearance of the double-pay men from the ranks of infantry units. In some ways, the transformations in military enterprise that Parrott identifies reflect the gradual transition from an aggregate-contract army to a state-commission army, to use John A. Lynn’s terminology.[4] Permanent armed forces altered service conditions for soldiers, who had to accept “low wages, plummeting social status and relentless discipline” (p. 289). Although large-scale military financier-contractors gradually disappeared, nobles continued to act as military enterprisers in states across Europe, committing their own credit to raise, equip, and maintain military units and then cooperating with royal administrators to keep them in the field. Parrott concludes that “if military enterprise was at root a highly developed form of commercial activity, the cultural credentials of military command shrouded this in the traditional values of a sword-bearing nobility” (p. 258).

As the book builds this complex analysis, some inconsistencies emerge. Parrott repeatedly questions state control of armed forces, stressing “military devolution” and “military decentralization.” But the book never really delineates the early modern states and political systems in which military enterprisers acted. Overlapping processes of military professionalization—including ranking systems, professional norms, and command cultures—arguably shaped the development of officer corps in the seventeenth century, but these dynamics are not fully examined. Parrott often refers to “traditional” forms of mercenary recruitment and contracting, which undermines the book’s attempts to challenge modernizing narratives of army reform and state development. The transformations of military contracting occurred during the European Wars of Religion, yet the political and religious contexts of these conflicts are rarely mined for insights on military enterprisers’ motives and goals. Parrott’s attempt to integrate privateering and naval warfare are laudable, but the book unfortunately does not investigate mercantile companies, such as the Dutch and English East India Companies. As a result, maritime warfare sometimes remains peripheral to the book’s main lines of argument on military contracting.

The Business of War succeeds in producing a groundbreaking analysis of early modern military contracting that suggestively points to an entirely new historical narrative of military enterprise from 1500 to today. This approach blurs the lines between public and private military activities, effectively problematizing conventional state development theories. Parrott convincingly argues that “‘state administration’ and ‘private enterprise’ cannot be neatly divided into separate spheres” (p. 150). By revising conventional notions of military enterprise, Parrott convincingly shows that we must consider “military enterprise as a social and cultural phenomenon, not simply as an exercise in profit-making” (p. 249). This nuanced examination of early modern military contracting makes PMCs such
as Blackwater USA seem incredibly complicated, and yet eerily familiar.

Notes


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