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What is Military History?

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Military Revolutions

The biggest area of contention in military history today concerns the idea of "military revolutions." A "military revolution," broadly speaking, is a period of rapid change in how warfare is conducted with results so significant that they change the course of historical development far beyond the military sphere. The fundamental argument is about whether they exist.

The original "military revolution" was named by Michael Roberts in a series of lectures delivered in 1955.[3] His thesis was that the introduction of effective musketry around 1560 led to a century of far-reaching transformation in which the key figure was the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus (Roberts was an historian of Sweden). Guns necessitated more linear battlefield tactics to make most effective use of the new firepower. Linear tactics required better trained and drilled troops, which led to the creation of standing armies and allowed new, more aggressive strategies. This pushed up the size of armies. At this point, the need for larger, better trained armies led governments to reorganize their administrations in order to raise and support such forces more effectively. It was this development – what Roberts argued for as the foundation of early modern state formation and thus the origin of modern national states – that gave Roberts's thesis its wider significance.

Though noted by some military historians, and despite its Big History claims, Roberts's ideas failed to make much impact for 20 years, an indication of the distance separating military history from mainstream historical debate during that time. Geoffrey Parker revived the idea in a 1976 article that actually critiqued Roberts's ideas, arguing instead for an earlier revolutionary turning point and a slightly different initial cause.[4] This inspired a small explosion of articles in the mid-1980s questioning almost every aspect of Roberts's original thesis in detail – especially the supposed tactical changes that lay at the heart of Roberts's chain of causation – and at times questioning the very concept of revolutionary change. But Parker returned to the subject decisively with his 1988 book *The Military Revolution*, noted above in chapter 2,

revising and expanding the ideas sketched in his 1976 article. Parker, an historian of Spain, saw little reason to rate Gustavus' tactics as more effective than those of the famed Spanish *tercios* that had already worked out an effective coordination of firepower and pikes by the early sixteenth century. He therefore moved the key revolutionary moment up almost a century, to the 1490s. He argued that the crucial gunpowder weaponry for stimulating change was not muskets but cannon, in particular in their devastating effect on medieval fortifications demonstrated in the French invasion of Italy in 1494. The invention by Italian engineers in the 1520s of the *trace italienne*, the geometric style of fortification designed to resist cannonade, restored the balance of offense and defense, but the range of cannonry meant that the geometry of sieges expanded vastly. It was this, Parker claimed, that necessitated tremendous increases in army size and the consequent effects in stimulating state building that Roberts had already noted. Furthermore, he connected the combination of gunpowder, *trace italienne* fortifications, and drilled armies raised by strong states to a dramatic rise in European power globally between 1500 and 1800. In short, cannon stimulated a military revolution that gave birth not just to the modern state but to European hegemony in the world.

It was the significance of these claims, presented clearly and elegantly, and backed by substantial scholarship, that allowed Parker's book to insert military history squarely into mainstream historical discussions. His thesis modified and gave more concrete form to similar claims about the impact of military technology and capitalism on world historical patterns that William McNeill, the dean of world historians, had explored a few years earlier in his book *The Pursuit of Power*.[5] Military history thus became associated with the rise of world history that was occurring at that time. His formulation of the military revolution idea did not, however, go unchallenged. Among a rising tide of focused studies that built on and questioned specific aspects of Parker's thesis, the work of Jeremy Black stands out as the third major formulation of the early modern military revolution idea. Black, an eighteenth-century specialist and one of the most productive and important military historians working in the world today, took Roberts's military revolution thesis in the opposite

direction from Parker chronologically and causally.[6] He argued first that both Roberts and, even more, Parker had placed the significant military changes in European warfare too early. It was only *after* 1660, he said, and really after 1720, that advances in European military techniques coalesced into a style of warfare that was noticeably superior to those of Europe's neighbors (especially the Ottoman Turks). And the word "techniques" is significant here, for he argued that it was not superior technology but superior battlefield discipline and maneuverability – abilities made possible by drill – that distinguished European armies after 1720. This reflected his inversion of the causal elements earlier in the process. Where Roberts and Parker had argued from new technology to changes in state power, Black argued that it was only after the reconsolidation of political and social power among European kings and their aristocracies, possible only with the ending of the Wars of Religion and the internal factionalism they so often fostered, that governments could harness the potential of new technologies. In short, he put social change as a necessary prior condition for the effective use of technology. Black's thesis was important, therefore, both for complexifying the notion of causation embedded in arguments about the military revolution and for bringing careful comparative analysis from a global perspective to the debate.

By the early 1990s, the idea of an early modern military revolution had gained such force and currency (even if its major proponents did not agree on what, precisely, caused and constituted the revolution) that the concept began to metastasize throughout the body of military historiography, extending well beyond early modern Europe even as debates about details of military transformation in early modern Europe continued to rage.[7] The most closely related extension of the idea was the claim, advanced first by Clifford Rogers in 1993,[8] that the transformations of the early modern period depended on a prior set of transformations that had affected late medieval warfare after about 1300. That set of changes had brought infantry to the fore after a long period of cavalry dominance on the battlefields of Europe and had, slightly later and especially in the form of the English longbow (Rogers is an Edward III scholar), emphasized infantry firepower. Rogers dubbed these changes the "Infantry Revolution." He also identified a

prior stage in the development of artillery that he claimed laid the groundwork for Parker's starting point, and proposed a model drawn from evolutionary biology of "punctuated equilibrium evolution" as opposed to revolution to characterize a set of changes in European warfare that now seemed to stretch from 1300 to the mid-1700s. Ten years later, Kenneth Chase set the idea of an "infantry revolution" in a global analysis that stressed the geographic importance of facing (or not having to face) steppe nomadic cavalry in the rise of infantry-based military systems that could make effective use of gunpowder weapons.[9]

But the even more powerful extension of the early modern military revolution debate came with the application of the abstract concept of a "military revolution" – especially in its Roberts–Parker form as a technologically initiated transformation of military practice with broad implications for the course of history generally – to other eras of history. "Military revolutions" were newly identified in ancient history, associated with the spread of bronze metallurgy and, especially, with the rise of chariot-riding elites, and later with the rise of iron metallurgy and mass infantry armies (the first "infantry revolution").[10] Significant and well-acknowledged military transformations of recent history were re-christened as revolutions: World War I saw a firepower revolution, World War II a maneuver revolution. Suddenly, military revolutions were everywhere.

The extension of this sort that generated (and continues to generate) the most debate posited a military revolution that its proponents claim is currently ongoing. Called the "Revolution in Military Affairs" (RMA) by those theorizing it, it actually had its roots in Soviet military theory in the 1970s and 1980s. Soviet military analysts who observed the use of early precision-guided munitions by the US at the end of the conflict in Vietnam began to write about a "military technical revolution" that could change the military balance between the two superpowers. American analysts picked up on this, and the literature converged with the "military revolution" historical literature to produce the Revolution in Military Affairs. RMA theorists claim revolutionary implications for linked technologies of communications and airpower.[11] The application of these technologies, it is said, are revolutionizing

battlefield action, simultaneously lifting the "fog of war" and making for a virtually bloodless battlefield (at least for the side capable of deploying an unmatchable superiority in such technology – major RMA theorists have tended to be from the former USSR and now from the US[12]). RMA writing is less clear about the broader implications of these military developments, in large part because they have not yet happened, which is one reason its theorists chose to distinguish their "Revolution in Military Affairs" from "military revolutions" that have analyzable historical consequences: the concept is intentionally more narrow. One way of looking at the relationship of RMAs to military revolutions in a broader historical context is that a military revolution occurs after a series of "anticipatory RMAs" have occurred. The amount of debate this extension of the military revolution idea has generated is therefore proportional not to its significance as an historical topic but to its currency: the positions staked out in the RMA debate have direct policy implications for military spending and force composition.

The many directions in which the debates about military revolutions have expanded mean that this new paradigm has subsumed some older ongoing debates in military history. The RMA debate in this light is partly an extension in new conceptual clothing of a long-running twentieth-century debate about the efficacy of airpower, a debate that goes back to the strategic bombing theories of Giulio Douhet and Billy Mitchell in the 1920s. Airpower proponents have long envisioned wars won at very low cost in (friendly) casualties through strategic bombing, and have long met resistance from theorists (and reality) who argue the ongoing need for conventional ground and naval forces as well.[13] The RMA literature is also interesting in largely ignoring the other side of this older historiography of strategic bombing, the side that debated (and continues to debate) not just the actual efficacy but the morality of this sort of warfare.[14] This debate extends to arguments about the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (two very different cases, in fact, in terms of this debate) and to the potential effects and morality of mutually assured nuclear annihilation. The advent of the nuclear age itself is a case for inclusion as a military revolution. Older historiographical controversies have also been

subsumed under arguments about military revolutions. Arguments about an "infantry revolution" of the fourteenth century form a counterpoint to older, technologically based arguments about the origins of cavalry dominance in medieval European warfare that saw the introduction of the stirrup as the basis not just for the tactical ascendancy of mounted warriors but also of the social system ("feudalism," so called, itself an historiographical point of contention that we will explore briefly below) that supposedly arose to support such warriors.[15]

What general philosophical and methodological issues underpin and inform the various related debates that make up "military revolution" historiography? Several stand out. At a level that almost reduces to pure semantics, there is the question that arises repeatedly in this literature of what constitutes a "revolution"? Some have questioned whether an "event" that stretches in several stages over several hundred years can properly be characterized as a revolution; this is the concern that led Rogers to propose "punctuated equilibrium evolution" as an alternate way of characterizing the military transformations of European warfare between 1300 and 1750. Such concerns are mirrored by similar concerns about terms such as Industrial Revolution and Agricultural Revolution, for example, though such cases also point out that many historians are happy to apply the term "revolution" to "events" extending over not just hundreds but thousands of years.

The aspect of this issue that is not pedantically semantic is the question of whether the various military revolutions that have been identified, including the paradigmatic early modern European one, actually exist as historical phenomena or are simply misleading historiographical constructs. The fundamental theoretical problem here concerns the dichotomy, possibly false, between continuity and disruptive change – between evolution and revolution – in conceptualizing the shape of the past. This is a potentially false dichotomy because in many ways the difference between gradualism and dramatic change is simply a matter of the chronological scale at which one examines events, as Daniel Dennett has pointed out about Stephen Jay Gould's original biological formulation of punctuated equilibrium.[16] That is, what looks at a very large scale like sudden change – the rapid shift, compared to

several million years of hunting and gathering, to agriculture in some areas between 12,000 and 8,000 years ago, for example – looks at a smaller scale like a slow and gradual process. (The true dichotomy is between gradualism – at various scales – and what Gould calls "saltation": sudden discontinuous leaps (Latin *saltus*, a jump or leap). This is the dichotomy that separates biologists and historians on one side from religious fundamentalists' views of both biological and historical evolution on the other.) But there is a strong case against military revolutions that questions whether the sudden and transformative changes claimed for them exist even at smaller chronological scales. That is (and this is the position Black takes, for instance, on the question of whether there was an early modern military revolution), there is gradualism all the way down, and trying to isolate a revolutionary moment "when things changed" is usually impossible. (The dawn of the atomic age may be an exception.)

Gradualist views of change are usually associated in the literature with questions about causation. One of the appealing things about military revolution arguments is the relative clarity and simplicity of the chain of causation they propose: a new technology appears and the consequences follow with unvarying logic. In its most simplistic form, this is classic technological determinism, though few of the best military revolution theories are quite that simplistic. Still, technological change tends to lie at the heart of almost every military revolution thesis, ancient, medieval, early modern, or modern. The problem, as many critics have pointed out, is that the consequences of new technology do not follow with unvarying logic. Rather, the impact of a new technology depends heavily on the social and cultural environment into which it is introduced. Thus, the introduction of gunpowder technology had very different implications for warfare in sixteenth-century Angola and sixteenth-century Japan, and the similarity of the effects of gunpowder in the latter case to those in Europe should be explained not by the inherent tendencies of the technology but by the similar paths that political and social developments had taken in both Europe and Japan prior to the introduction of guns.[17] The trouble for proponents of such views is that complex, contingent, multicausal arguments that start from nuanced views of social structure,

economic activity, and cultural tendencies are harder to explain clearly than monocausal formulas, whether technology or, in Kenneth Chase's view of infantry revolutions and the spread of gunpowder, geography is the single cause. (This may explain why Parker's formulation of the military revolution idea achieved far greater impact than did McNeill's slightly earlier but less clearly formulated take on the same broad subject.)

An interesting comment on this historiographical tendency may be seen in the fate of the nineteenth century in the military revolution literature. A relatively short period (1830–1914) of undeniably intense and significant technological change in military weaponry, the nineteenth century has nevertheless mostly escaped being labeled as any sort of military revolution. Why? Perhaps because there is no single technological breakthrough that characterizes the period, but rather a gradually accelerating process of technological experimentation. This in turn emphasizes the common understanding of the period as one of deep economic, social, and cultural transformation (that is, of the coming of the Industrial Revolution), and the recognition that military change was simply one aspect of that deeper set of changes. Military technology in this view was simply one branch of industrial technology. And industrial technology from Marxist and increasingly many other historiographical perspectives is not the cause but one consequence, one product with further consequences, of the socioeconomic transformations that produced the Industrial Revolution. In other words, the nineteenth century confounds simplistic, technologically driven views of military transformation, and so fits uneasily into the military revolution paradigm. As a result, it tends to be relegated in that literature to a position of denouement (the European dominance of the nineteenth century was simply the playing out of European superiority established between 1500 and 1800 as a consequence of the military revolution, in Parker's formulation) or of foundation (industrialization having been well established by the early twentieth century, it can disappear into the background, leaving the stage free for revolutions based on tanks, planes, and electronic communications equipment). Put another way, nineteenth-century military technology is seen in that literature to have led to tactical stalemate in the trenches of World War I

that necessitated new technological revolutions to break the deadlock.

It may also be relevant that the various technological transformations of the nineteenth century eventuated not just in European conquests globally (far more pervasively, in fact, than between 1500 and 1800), but in the undeniable disaster of 1914–18. For there is, apart from examinations of so-called military revolutions in ancient history (and even in some of those), a more or less explicit connection between accounts of advances in military technology and accounts of the "rise of the West," to use McNeill's famous phrase. This leads us to another deep controversy in contemporary military history, the question of "western" exceptionalism, that is relevant to the questions of military revolutions, whether they exist, and what the real impact of military transformation has been. We shall turn to that controversy in the next section.

Whatever one's position on the question of military revolutions in history (and it is probably clear at this point that we are among the skeptics concerning their existence in this realm), the importance of military revolutions as an historiographical phenomenon cannot be denied. The idea has been responsible for military history's re-entry into the mainstream historical big picture, to the extent that sections on the military transformation of early modern Europe, whether called a revolution or not, are now common in survey textbooks. And because the concept has been applied across such a broad chronological sweep of history, it has in some ways provided a conceptual common ground where the somewhat diffuse interests of pre-modern or pre-industrial military historians and their modernist colleagues can meet and productively debate, exchange, and cross-fertilize. In short, it has been, for military history as a field, a most healthy controversy.

"The West": Exceptionalism and Dominance?

If the military revolution debate has been good for military history, it is less clear that the controversy this section examines has been as productive or beneficial. The controversy concerns a set of ideas that are characterized by the notions