3. Warfare in the Old Regime 1648–1789

PETER WILSON

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF OLD-REGIME WARFARE

At about 11 a.m. on 11 May 1745 a large column of British and Hanoverian infantry approached a line of French troops near the village of Fontenoy, close to the modern Franco-Belgian border. When the opposing forces were only 30 metres apart, an English officer allegedly stepped forward and cordially invited the French to fire first. This story, though almost certainly apocryphal, nonetheless seems to epitomise warfare in old-regime Europe.

Conflicts in this period are almost universally thought of as more sedate, narrow and limited in comparison with earlier and later wars. Those of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries are regarded as particularly ferocious, but also as a source of military innovation, when new tactics and weaponry were developed and standing armies came into being. Similarly, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815) seem the dawn of a new era of mass-citizen armies, grand strategy and military decisiveness. War in both periods involved fundamental issues stirring the passions of the participants; religion and domestic political power in the former era, nationalism and revolutionary ideology in the latter.

These military factors are related to wider social, political and economic aspects characterising these periods generally as distinct phases in European history. Thus, the religious and civil strife of the so-called Confessional Age (1517–1648) was replaced by relative tranquillity under the rule of largely absolutist monarchies. These monopolised violence, depriving their inhabitants of the means to oppose them militarily, and directed their efforts outwards into limited external war fought in their personal dynastic interest. Armies, it is widely believed, became divorced
from the societies they were paid to protect, recruiting themselves from the politically and economically disenfranchised, while remaining under the command of a privileged, aristocratic elite. The changes associated with the French Revolution disturbed these structures, just as they undermined the rest of the old regime, heralding a new era for military, as well as political and social history.

This is not the place to debate the validity of this standard periodisation of European history, nor to re-examine its implicit relationship between military and wider historical change. One important point does, however, need to be made. Like many other accepted generalisations about European development, the concept of old-regime warfare as limited is based primarily on French and German historiography. Given both the German tradition of regarding political structures as largely militarily determined, and the historical pre-eminence of Louis XIV's France as Europe's premier absolutist monarchy and great power, the link between absolutism and permanent, professional armies has been assumed as a defining characteristic for the continent as a whole. The subsequent rise of Prussia and the influence of its army as a general European model only serves to reinforce this point. ²

Similarly, there has been a tendency to regard the campaigns waged in north-western and central Europe as paradigmatic of all old-regime warfare. Not only are the exploits of great German and French generals, like Prince Eugene and Maurice de Saxe, exceptionally well documented, but this geographical area also saw most of Britain's limited involvement in continental land warfare prior to the Peninsular War. The understandable interest in the Duke of Marlborough, as well as the forces under later, generally less successful, British generals, has helped concentrate Anglophone research on the same areas, even to the relative neglect of British military involvement in Spain in the early eighteenth century. This has been valuable for highlighting aspects that were indeed important features of the period as a whole. However, inevitably, there has been a tendency to measure other developments against these, especially French models, as well as a neglect of change over both time and space.

The standard scheme looks far less logical when viewed from the perspective of eastern Europe, or the continent's northern