

Myths of military revolution: European expansion and Eurocentrism

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Abstract

This article critiques explanations of the rise of the West in the early modern period premised on the thesis that military competition drove the development of gunpowder technology, new tactics, and the Westphalian state, innovations that enabled European trans-continental conquests. Even theories in International Relations and other fields that posit economic or social root causes of Western expansion often rely on this “military revolution” thesis as a crucial intervening variable. Yet, the factors that defined the military revolution in Europe were absent in European expeditions to Asia, Africa, and the Americas, and conventional accounts are often marred by Eurocentric biases. Given the insignificance of military innovations, Western expansion prior to the Industrial Revolution is best explained by Europeans’ ability to garner local support and allies, but especially by their deference to powerful non-Western polities.

Keywords

Early modern history, empire, Eurocentrism, European expansion, military revolution

Introduction

Understandings of an early modern military revolution are crucial for fundamental International Relations (IR) concerns, including the rise of the sovereign state and the modern state system, as well as the European conquest of much of the rest of the world. This article re-examines the process of European overseas expansion in the early modern era. It critiques the military revolution thesis that recurring great power wars drove military innovation and state-building in Western Europe, which subsequently gave these

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states a competitive advantage that they used to dominate non-European polities. This thesis is a bedrock of much historically oriented social science. Even theories that posit economic or societal factors as the fundamental drivers of European expansion 1500–1800 often rely on the military revolution as a proximate cause or crucial intervening variable. Given that military force has long been regarded as the ultimate decider under conditions of international anarchy, the history of warfare is crucial as the raw material for generating and testing theories of international politics. Yet, developments in military history often filter through only slowly and partially to the social sciences, and both areas have suffered from a deep Eurocentric bias.

In substantiating these claims, the first, empirical aim of the article is to challenge the idea that Europeans won victories abroad by using the same style of war that they practiced at home. Technology, tactics, and broader changes like the rise of large, professional, permanent armies and what is conventionally referred to as the Westphalian state, developed to fight great power wars in Europe, explain very little of the growing European presence in the Americas, Asia, and Africa up until the late 18th century. The military innovations said to be decisive in Europe were almost entirely absent elsewhere before the Industrial Revolution. Instead, early modern European expansion in the Americas, Asia, and Africa was largely carried out by tiny forces of adventurers and chartered companies, who adapted local tactics, and usually did not possess any significant technological advantage over their opponents.

This article instead foregrounds the crucial importance of local support and indigenous allies in enabling Europeans to first establish and then maintain the terrestrial nodes of their largely maritime, networked, overseas domains. The Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, English, and others inserted themselves into pre-existing rivalries, using and being used by non-Western actors in pursuit of commercial, diplomatic, logistical, and military advantage. Even more significant was a judicious European recognition of their own inferiority vis-a-vis Asian empires, which elicited European deference and subordination. On the rare occasions that Europeans challenged these non-Western great powers in the early modern period, they suffered rapid and salutary defeats. Even the West's main military-technological advantage, the gun-armed sailing ship, failed to alter the strategic balance. The final empirical section briefly notes the obvious yet under-appreciated point that at the same time as Europeans were expanding into Asia, Asians were conquering far more substantial swaths of Europe. This Ottoman expansion into Eastern and Central Europe exhibited a mastery of military revolution techniques that often anticipated and surpassed their European foes.

A more global view premised on the agency of powerful non-Western actors serves to correct the undeniable Eurocentric bias in IR (Barkawi, 2005; Hobson, 2004, 2012; Suzuki et al., 2014; Zarakol, 2010). This bias is starkly visible in the geographic focus of historical articles (those dealing with the period 476–1919) published in 12 leading IR journals from 1980 to 2007.

This Eurocentric bias is particularly obvious in quantitative work. Thus, Levy (1983: 10) is forthright in introducing the Great Power Wars 1495–1815 data set:

The concern of this study is with the modern Great Power system, which originated in Europe about five centuries ago.... The Eurocentric bias of this study is deliberate. The system centered

on Europe is of greatest historical interest to most Western scholars, and most theories of international behavior and war have been derived from it.

The Correlates of War data set only includes states before 1919 if they have been recognized by both Britain and France, systematically excluding non-Western powers (Butcher and Griffiths, forthcoming; Fazal, 2007).

The huge disparity revealed in Table 1 between the historically oriented IR articles on Europe and those on the rest of the world is replicated in military history. Andrade (2013:11) estimates that there are “two or three orders of magnitude” more work on Europe than any other region (see also Glete, 2000: 11; Subrahmanyam, 2006). Jeremy Black (2004a: 212) describes how this bias plays out in history:

[The] tendency [is] first to focus largely, if not exclusively, on Western developments, and secondly to consider those elsewhere in terms of Western paradigms.... Thus, for example, the focus in discussion of military revolutions is the West, the definitions are Western, and in so far as non-Western powers feature it is to record the success of their Western counterparts.

A central aim of the argument presented here is to challenge and correct this pervasive and enduring Eurocentric bias.

The article begins by establishing the importance of the military revolution thesis for IR. It then summarizes the origins of the European military revolution thesis, before then outlining how this thesis is said to explain European conquests in the early modern period. The military revolution debate, including that about the rise of the state, began as an exclusively European concern. The crucial innovation of seminal books like those by William McNeill (1982) and especially Geoffrey Parker (1996 [1988]), and more recently scholars like Phillip Hoffman (2015), has been to link the military revolution in Europe with the global rise of the West. This article is squarely focused on this link, rather than contributing yet another piece on Europe.

There are, of course, other explanations of European dominance that privilege non-military factors, from economics to culture, but I maintain that in IR and the social sciences more generally, the military explanation is dominant. Even those like North (1991), Strang (1991), MacDonald (2014), or Anievas and Nisancioglu (2015), who account for

Table 1. Eurocentric Bias in Historical International Relations Articles in Leading Journals, 1980–2007.

Geographic focus	Number of articles
Europe and Canada	205
East Asia	66
USA	35
Middle East and North Africa	21
South Asia	6
South-East Asia	6
Sub-Saharan Africa	5

Source: Information from Teaching, Research and International Policy (TRIP) articles database.

the rise of the West and the dominance of the sovereign state on economic, cultural, or societal grounds, still include military superiority as a crucial intervening variable. Although the article carries implications for historians, it is primarily aimed at political scientists.

The period of interest here is the early modern era, from around 1500 until the late 18th century. Most historians and social scientists agree that the time around the beginning of the 19th century represents an important historical break point and the end of the early modern period (Bayly, 1998; Buzan and Lawson, 2014; Nexon, 2009; Pomeranz, 2001; Teschke, 2003; Thompson, 1999). Bounding the scope of the argument to the period before the end of the 18th century reflects the importance of relatively sharp military change after this point, the economic and technological transformations of the Industrial Revolution, and the ideational changes of nationalism (Buzan and Lawson, 2015).

The military revolution and European expansion in IR

As discussed later, the military revolution remains a live issue for historians, especially its global implications (Agoston, 2014; Andrade, 2013, 2016; Clulow, 2014; Eaton and Wagoner, 2014; Lee, 2011a, 2011b, 2015; Parrott, 2012). However, does it really matter for IR and social scientists more generally? The military revolution thesis seeks to answer some of the biggest questions in IR: why is the world comprised of sovereign states, rather than the multiplicity of different political forms that existed in Europe and elsewhere previously? Why was the West able to conquer and transform much of the rest of the world, thereby shaping the fundamental constitutional order of the international system as it stands today? This view of early modern history still directly shapes current social-scientific thinking on these subjects.

Following Thompson's (1999) idea of the "military superiority thesis," MacDonald's (2014: 18) book summarizes the dominant state of thinking in IR on why Europe conquered much of the rest of the world by exactly replicating the military revolution argument:

European warfare underwent a profound transformation beginning in the sixteenth century. On land, the spread of gunpowder-based weapons, as well as specialized fortifications designed to resist these arms, transformed the nature of combat.... European states were increasingly compelled to raise large standing armies, which were dominated by highly trained and well-drilled infantry.... Although driven by competition between European states, the unintended consequences of this "military revolution" was to widen the gap in military power between Europe and the rest of the world.

Another social science account, Phillip Hoffman's (2015) *Why Did Europe Conquer the World?*, puts forward the same argument. Europe's fragmented, competitive geopolitics and incessant warfare meant that gunpowder technology, the organizational application of this new technology in warfare, and the fiscal-administrative underpinnings of war advanced further in early modern Western Europe than elsewhere. Capitalizing on this advantage, Europeans then used their superior gunpowder weapons, forts, and ships to build global empires.

In presenting the conventional wisdom in IR as based on the military revolution thesis, it is important to consider the sophistication and nuances of some of the leading accounts that often suffer by simplification, as well as considering alternative perspectives. Tilly's (1992) later explanation of the rise of the sovereign state takes pains to acknowledge the importance of enduring diversity, different paths to success, and the importance of capital as well as coercion. So, too, is Spruyt careful to identify his areas of disagreement with the military revolution thesis. Thus, he argues that changes in military technology cannot explain increased variation in political forms (Spruyt, 1994: 83, 111, 157). Similar to Tilly, Spruyt is at pains to emphasize the diversity of forms that arose at the end of the medieval era as changes in trade reshaped social coalitions, leading to the rise of city-states and merchant-leagues, as well as sovereign states. Yet, for both scholars, their empirical focus is almost exclusively on Europe, rather than the central goal of this article: explaining early modern European expansion.

What of more critical, Marxist accounts that are very different from the military revolution thesis? In foregrounding property and class relations, scholars like Teschke (1998, 2003) and Lacher (2006) persuasively argue that the early modern period was fundamentally distinct from the later era of modern capitalism and high imperialism in the 19th century. They also see the military revolution thesis as constituting "the dominant paradigm of state-formation theory in contemporary scholarship and serv[ing] as one of the key intellectual legitimations for mainstream IR accounts of the rise of the modern states-system" (Teschke, 2003: 118–119). However, in drawing their evidence overwhelmingly from Europe, these scholars have relatively little to say about relations with other regions. To the extent that non-Western actors are mentioned, the portrayal is one of passive victims of domineering Westerners (e.g. Teschke, 2003: 204–206). In this sense, whatever their differences, Tilly, Spruyt, Lacher, and Teschke are, like the advocates of the military revolution thesis, representative of the Eurocentric imbalance exposed in Table 1.

Anievas and Nisancioglu's (2015, 2017) work on the rise of the West is in a different category, both in their attention to the problem of Eurocentrism, and in their extensive consideration of the Mongols, Ottomans, and Mughals, as well as various actors in the Americas, Africa, and South-East Asia. These authors advance a theory of uneven and combined development. The rise of the West is said to be a result of the interaction of the supposedly singular European experience of feudalism, which created a distinct development path in the West (unevenness), and geopolitical competition both within Europe and between European and non-European powers (combination). Despite its explicitly critical stance, it is notable how much of the military revolution thesis is incorporated into this account, with prominent citations to the authors discussed earlier, notably, Parker, McNeill, and Hoffman (Anievas and Nisancioglu, 2015: 257, 260, 263; 2017: 46–51). First is the idea of Europe as a uniquely competitive military environment, which forced European states to quickly adopt military innovations (Anievas and Nisancioglu, 2015: 255–256; 2017: 48). In contrast, Asian empires are said to have faced much less competition, and hence were less innovative in warfare (Anievas and Nisancioglu, 2015: 257; 2017: 45). Second, Europeans are said to have used these same military innovations developed in Europe, which gave them "a decisive comparative advantage in the means of violence and in their fiscal and organizational capacities," in

their early modern campaigns of intercontinental conquest (Anievas and Nisancioglu, 2017: 51). In specifying these decisive military advantages, the authors again follow the military revolution thesis in speaking of drilled infantry using muskets, and gun-armed sailing ships (Anievas and Nisancioglu, 2015: 257; 2017: 47, 49).

Thus, in sum, and notwithstanding some important exceptions, for most IR scholars, the military revolution narrative remains the presumed foundation of why the world is the way it is and how it got that way (Keene, 2002; Nexon, 2009; Suzuki et al., 2014). The influence of this thesis extends well beyond just realist and Weberian IR scholars. More broadly, given the huge consequences for contemporary international politics, examining the history of European expansion is too important to be left to the historians.

The origins of the military revolution thesis

Historians' work on a purported military revolution in early modern Europe is a crucial foundation for IR scholars' understanding of the evolution and rise of the sovereign state at the expense of other forms of political organization that populated the medieval system (Downing, 1992; Ertman, 1997; Ruggie, 1983; Spruyt, 1994; Tilly, 1986, 1992). It is equally important in explaining the expansion and dominance of the West over polities in other parts of the world (Anievas and Nisancioglu, 2015; Bull and Watson, 1984; Hoffman, 2015; MacDonald, 2014; Thompson, 1999; Thompson and Rasler, 1999). Although there are many variations on the basic military revolution thesis (see Glete, 2002; Mortimer, 2004; Rogers, 1995a, 1995b), this section concentrates on the work of its leading exponents.

In 1955, Michael Roberts argued that the century 1560–1660 saw a revolution in military affairs that “exercised a profound influence on the course of European history. It stands like a great divide separating medieval society from the modern world” (Roberts, 1995 [1955]: 13). Of course, this period includes the Treaty of Westphalia that much IR scholarship has conventionally regarded as a similarly profound date in marking the triumph of the sovereign state (for reviews and critiques, see Branch, 2015; Krasner, 1993; Osiander, 2001). This correspondence is far from coincidental, and underlines the significance of early modern history for contemporary IR concepts and theory. Although a military historian, Roberts was putting forward a much broader argument about the origin of the state and the contemporary international system. The military revolution argument brought the sub-field of military history, previously rather isolated, into the core concerns of history more generally (Lorge, 2008: 4; Rogers, 1995b: 1), but also indirectly into those of the social sciences as well.

There are four key components to Roberts's military revolution thesis: tactics, strategy, army size, and socio-political effects. The sequence begins with innovations in tactics. In the 1590s, the Dutch Maurice of Nassau took inspiration from ancient Roman military tactics in arguing for the use of linear battle formations, especially the use of volley fire by musketeers. Later, during the crucible of the Thirty Years War, Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus combined linear infantry formations with light field artillery and cavalry charges for shock effect. These new tactics required more disciplined troops, and hence more training and more officers as part of a permanent standing army. A major

shift in strategy was the second key element as opposing coalitions began to use multiple armies to achieve larger strategic aims.

The third tenet is the rapidly increasing size of armies, said to be “the result of revolution in strategy, made possible by the revolution in tactics, and made necessary by the circumstances of the Thirty Years War” (Roberts, 1995 [1955]: 18). The increase in army size was crucial in that it forms the link between the purely military and more generally political parts of the thesis (Thompson and Rasler, 1999). Supporting such large, permanent, professional armies put unprecedented administrative and fiscal strains on the politics of Europe: “military needs drove the monarchs into ever-increasing interference in the lives of their subjects” (Roberts, 1995 [1955]: 21). New agencies had to be formed to administer and maintain armies and the associated logistics. The use of violence increasingly became centralized as only larger and richer polities could meet the needs of contemporary warfare. This meant not only that what had been feudal vassals and regional grandees lost autonomy relative to the monarch, who now began to preside over much more unified, bureaucratic, hierarchically organized domains, but also that the use of organized violence by non-state actors on land and at sea also declined. Finally, these changes created the need for a lot more money. In the short term, this led to new forms of credit and debt, and later fiscal innovations. Hence, we have the creation of the modern sovereign state.

Very little of this will seem new or surprising to IR scholars familiar with Tilly’s famous dictum about war making the state and vice versa, or works on state formation by Spruyt (1994), Ertman (1997), Downing (1992), and others. However, the point here is that Roberts preceded these social scientists by several decades, and thus that the influence of this dictum on comparative politics, sociology, and IR theory is in large part the product of the history of the early modern military revolution (as well as earlier historians like Leopold van Ranke and Otto Hintze).

The military revolution and European expansion

In the highly influential book *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West*, Parker (1996 [1988]) agreed that the increasing administrative and fiscal demands of a new type of warfare had given rise to the modern sovereign state through a process of military competition, emulation, and conquest. For Parker, however, it was technology rather than tactics that was the prime mover. Specifically, the rise of cannons meant that medieval castle walls suddenly became obsolete from the middle of the 15th century. The response to these new gunpowder weapons was a new style of fortification, *trace italienne* designs with thick, low walls to resist artillery. The catch, however, was that these defenses were very expensive to build (especially as the idea was to have multiple, mutually supporting fortifications), and required very large forces to either garrison or attack. This technological change in artillery and fortifications caused the increase in the size of armies, hence the need for greater revenue and administrative capacity, and hence the resulting rise of the modern sovereign state. As feudal lords and non-state actors simply could not afford to keep up with these advances, they lost power to the emerging centralized states (Parker, 1996 [1988]: 39, 65).

Much more importantly for the purposes of this article, however, Parker turns the military revolution thesis away from purely European concerns in arguing that it also

explains the rise of the West. For Parker, as for many others, the puzzle is how such a small, peripheral, and historically backward area like Western Europe ended up in control of something like a third of the world's land area by 1800 (Hoffman, 2015: 3). He summarizes his case as follows: "the key to the Westerners' success in creating the first truly global empires between 1500 and 1750 depended upon precisely those improvements in the ability to wage war which have been termed 'the military revolution'" (Parker, 1996 [1988]: 4). Essential to this more encompassing conception is a parallel naval aspect, with the innovation of gun-armed ocean-going sailing ships from the early 1500s. These new warships provided Europeans with the means to reach the Americas and the Indian Ocean, as well as to dominate local naval forces and project power into the littoral (see also Cipolla, 1965; Headrick, 2010). Once again, the expense of capital-intensive war at sea was said to favor the use of organized violence by public authorities over non-state parties, and Westphalian states over other forms of polity (see also Glete, 2000: 5). Ultimately, intra-European military competition resulted in European dominance over the rest of the world.

McNeill (1982) replicates central elements of the military revolution thesis in his hugely ambitious *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force and Society since AD 1000*. Once again, unremitting military competition in Western Europe was said to be crucial in driving and diffusing technological and organizational innovations (equally central to Paul Kennedy's (1988) *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*). The success of disciplined, drilled, professional infantry armies from the later medieval period was the most important military innovation. Although non-Western actors like the Ottomans, Mughals, and Japanese mastered the use of modern artillery sufficiently to dominate local rulers, these "gunpowder empires" thereafter succumbed to a low-equilibrium competence trap. Absent the driver of military competition on the scale of Western Europe, they stagnated until the point where the gap with the West was unbridgeable (McNeill, 1982: 95–96; see also Chase, 2003; Hoffman, 2015).

In sum, the most important common elements for Roberts, Parker, and McNeill are as follows. Although there was some reciprocal influence, the development of the modern state was primarily a result of the need to service increasingly large, complex, and expensive armies, and thus indirectly the result of military competition in Western Europe, said to be at a higher pitch than in other regions of the world. Even if Eastern powers could emulate some aspects of the military revolution in their armies, they could not keep up with the West because their political system did not conform to the model of the sovereign state (Parker, 1995: 355). Finally and crucially, the same military advances in Europe are said to explain European victories in the rest of the world.

The irrelevance of the military revolution for European expansion

The first challenge to conventional thinking is that the key military and broader political-institutional changes that comprised the military revolution in Europe were not replicated in the first two-and-a-half centuries of European expansion. The tactics, armies,

and states that defined 16th- and 17th-century warfare in Europe were almost totally irrelevant elsewhere. There were no massive combined-arms forces, nor was there a sustained commitment of national economic resources, nor even were the most successful European empire-builders states at all. Where the military revolution account stresses large armies, controlled by states, employing the same tactics and technology developed in great power wars in Europe, this section challenges each one of these elements. First, European forces across the oceans were tiny (and hence often dependent on much more numerous local allies, as discussed subsequently). Second, the process of early modern European expansion was mostly spearheaded by groups of adventurers or chartered companies, not the armies of sovereign states. Third, tactically, Europeans were more often than not forced to adapt to local circumstances, a conclusion that undermines the belief that there was one, dominant, superior form of war-fighting in the early modern world developed in Europe and used to subordinate all others. Beyond the brute necessity of crossing the oceans, early modern innovations in military technology were relatively insignificant in determining the success of European expeditionary warfare.

The first of these three elements, the question of army size, is vital for the military revolution thesis. As noted, this is not just because the escalating size of armies in Europe is seen as a key historical piece of evidence for the competitive dynamic at the heart of the thesis, but even more so because this aspect provides the link between the strictly military and fiscal-administrative parts of the argument (Thompson and Rasler, 1999: 12–13). The need to raise and support more and more troops to stay competitive in the context of relentless military rivalry required more and more taxes and an increasingly sophisticated state administrative apparatus. Yet, in direct contrast to developments in Europe, the historical record shows that European successes in Asia, Africa, and the Americas were achieved with minuscule forces operating on shoestring budgets at distances that precluded any substantive logistical support, or even much administrative direction, from their home states (Marshall, 1980: 16).

Famously, Cortes and Pizzaro defeated the Aztecs and Incas despite having only a few hundred Spanish troops at most behind them (Black, 1998; Hassig, 2006; Kamen, 2002). At roughly the same time, the Portuguese managed to create a network of fortified ports and control key sea lanes extending from East Africa to the Persian Gulf, Eastern and Western India, South-East Asia, China, and Japan with a total force that never exceeded 10,000 men (Glete, 2000: 81), a ridiculously small number by European or local standards (Disney, 2009; Subrahmanyam, 2012). The key campaigns led by Albuquerque that built the Portuguese *Estado da India* in the early 1500s seldom had more than 1000 Portuguese combatants (Guilmartin, 1995: 309). The largest Portuguese expedition, which unsuccessfully sallied into the Red Sea in 1541, had only 2300 troops (Casale, 2010: 69; Headrick, 2010: 71).

In the second half of the 17th century, combined Dutch East India Company forces across South-East Asia never exceeded 12,000 (Reid, 1982: 7), with individual campaigns seldom mustering more than 1000 Dutch troops (Charney, 2004; Marshall, 1980; Ricklefs, 1993). As late as 1788, there were only 8045 British soldiers in the whole of India (Roy, 2011: 208). Even in the 19th century, long after the formation of huge territorial empires that were very different from their largely maritime early modern

predecessors, European states rarely sent large armies abroad in pursuit of trans-continental conquest (MacDonald, 2014: 28–33).

The second crucial component of the military revolution thesis is the growing public dominance of the means of organized violence, particularly modern armies, artillery, new-style fortifications, and advanced gun-armed sailing ships. War was said to have become the sole prerogative of the state.

The essentially private nature of the Spanish conquests in the Americas forcefully demonstrates the radically different nature of extra-European expeditionary warfare compared with the tenets of the military revolution thesis. Contrary to the idea of a growing state monopoly of the means of violence, Kamen (2002: 93) explains:

Not a single Spanish army was expended on “conquest.” When Spaniards established their control, they did so through the sporadic efforts of small groups of adventurers whom the crown later attempted to bring under its control. These men, who proudly assumed the description of “conquistadors,” were often not even soldiers.

Restall (2003: 32–39) refers to the “myth of the king’s army” in confirming that only a small minority of *conquistadors* (whom he refers to as “armed Spanish entrepreneurs”) had received any military training. He further observes that there were no officers and no formal chain of command in such forces. Nor was the private character of the Spanish military efforts in the Americas limited only to the initial encounters, with Lee (2011a: 6) noting of subsequent expansion that, “appeals to the king’s authority notwithstanding, throughout the seventeenth century virtually all of these actions were conducted as private-enterprise ventures.” For most of the time, there was no Spanish navy either, the crown relying exclusively on chartered private ships (Kamen, 2002: 170).

As fundamentally hybrid private–public entities, the Dutch and English East India Companies in the 17th and 18th centuries jointly comprise an even more obvious refutation of the idea that early modern European expansion was a product of state armies, and thus once again underlines the fundamentally different nature of war inside and beyond Europe. These had what are now taken to be defining features of a private company, being owned by private shareholders, in the business of trade, and run for profit. Yet, they also had quintessentially sovereign prerogatives, including the right to engage in diplomacy and war, while they also maintained significant military and naval forces (Erikson, 2014; Stern, 2011; Ward, 2008). The two hybrid chartered companies were perhaps the most important agents of early modern European expansion. The Dutch company built a sprawling networked domain concentrated in present-day Indonesia, but also extending to Japan, Taiwan, mainland South-East Asia, South Asia, and Southern Africa (Boxer, 1965; Gaastra, 2003; Ward, 2008). Its English counterpart eventually became even more powerful in South Asia, though the company was still careful to acknowledge the overlordship of the Mughal Emperor (Stern, 2011). There simply were no English, British, or Dutch armies in the East, in the sense of those paid for out of state taxes and directed by state officials, until late in the 1700s. Thus, whether it is in the Americas or to the East, European expansion was primarily driven by non-state armed private and hybrid actors, in direct opposition to the idea that it was the fiscal-military superiority of the sovereign state and its armies and navies that explains Western expansion in this era.

Turning to the third factor, in explaining European conquests, Parker, McNeill, Hoffman, and Chase, as well as others drawing on them like Anievas and Nisancioglu, emphasize Western technology and tactics, such as volley fire from muskets and new-style *trace italienne* fortifications. Yet, technological and tactical advantages were rarely decisive in European expansion (Black, 2004b; Lee, 2015). In the East, the technological gap between European and local forces was often quite slight or non-existent, particularly in firearms. Asian and African rulers generally found it easy to acquire Western weapons, either through open trade or with the defection of renegades (Andrade, 2016; Charney, 2004; Lorge, 2008; Thornton, 1999). This was not true in the Americas as the demographic catastrophe caused by exposure to Old World diseases helped to bring about political collapse, but this had little to do with military factors as such. Spanish infantry forces in the Americas relied primarily on their steel swords and armor for their crucial early victories (Black, 1998; Hassig, 2006; Lee, 2011a). Cavalry charges, volley fire, naval broadsides, and field artillery were mainly absent. Muskets were most often used as clubs (Restall, 2003: 143). Looking at the failed Western efforts to expand into Africa in the early modern period (which have received far less scholarly attention because they were failures, see Thornton, 1999, 2011), Headrick (2010: 143) holds that “Firearms were even less useful in Angola than in the Americas.”

South Asia has a particular significance, in being for Parker and others the primary theater of war between Western and non-Western powers prior to 1800 outside Europe (i.e. excluding the centuries-long struggle with the Ottomans discussed later), given its demographic weight relative to other regions (Black, 2004a: 221; Parker, 1996 [1988]: 136). Parker (2002) and others stress the importance of *trace italienne* fortresses in allowing European forces in the Indian Ocean littoral to hold out against much larger attacking forces, yet these are said to require very large forces to be effective, forces that, as discussed earlier, were simply not available. Historians and contemporary observers like Wellington often maintained that Indian artillery was as good as that of the East India Company in the later 1700s (Roy, 2011: 200–201). Speaking more generally of the East India Company’s conquest of India, Peers (2011: 82) argues that “defined in technological or organizational terms, military superiority had a relatively minor role.” As discussed later, gun-armed sailing ships, often portrayed as the most decisive Western technological innovation, do not invalidate this conclusion.

Turning to tactics, a mid-16th-century Spanish combat manual:

argued that in the Americas the patterns and practices of European warfare were irrelevant ... the treatise proposed that linear formations, hierarchical units, and permanent garrisons be abandoned in favour of small, covert fighting units dedicated to search-and-destroy missions over several years. (Restall, 2003: 32)

In North America, European settlers adopted the “skulking way of war” of their Native American opponents and allies, rather than linear formations and volley fire (Lee, 2011b; Malone, 2000). In the Indian Ocean, once again, few European forces used the tactics that defined warfare in Europe itself. The first use of volley fire by European drilled infantry in the East only came in the 1740s in India, almost 250 years after Europeans had established their presence in the Indian Ocean, and right at the tail end of the period that

Parker's and McNeill's arguments claim to explain (McNeill, 1982: 117, 142; Parker, 1996 [1988]: 133). Recent historiography has stressed that rather than Western tactics reigning supreme, both Europeans and local forces hybridized in learning from the other (Gommans and Kolff, 2001; Lorge, 2008; Peers, 2007, 2011; Roy, 2011, 2013). For example, while South Asian armies came to use more infantry and artillery, Europeans adapted irregular cavalry and Indian logistical solutions.

Why did Europeans not use the same tactics overseas as at home? Critics have questioned the assumption that the technology, tactics, and organization that may have been optimal in Western and Central Europe must have been optimal elsewhere. Writing on warfare in South-East Asia, Charney (2004: 53) notes that volley fire is just not very useful in a jungle, while Thornton makes the same point about warfare in African forests. The Dutch and the Portuguese were just as likely to mimic the tactics of their Javanese and Angolan opponents as vice versa (Charney, 2004: 279; Marshall, 1980: 25; Ricklefs, 1993: 37–38; Thornton, 1999: 106). European horses and pack animals were eliminated by disease in sub-Saharan Africa, largely precluding the use of cavalry and cannons (Thornton, 1999, 2007). Even the Eastern half of Europe, often overlooked, provides notably different conditions that were much more favorable for a different style of war than in the other half of the continent (Frost, 2000). Those writing on the western steppe area stress how the different geographical conditions that obtained compared to Western Europe meant that local warfare was not different because it was backwards (Davies, 2007).

Thus, there is a fundamental problem with the idea that Europeans could take the allegedly superior style of warfare that they had developed at home and use it to defeat backward opponents elsewhere. The European forces that fought in the Americas, Asia, and Africa in the early modern period looked nothing like the armies that waged the Thirty Years War, and enjoyed none of the substantial fiscal, administrative, or logistic support from sovereign states that was supposedly a prerequisite for those fighting according to the new methods.

A closer consideration of the preceding evidence suggests a new and very different picture of early modern European expansion. Where they succeeded, small, largely freelance European ventures adapted local tactics, cultivated local allies and support, and successfully insinuated themselves into existing power struggles and hierarchies to build primarily maritime networks of overseas possessions (Phillips and Sharman, 2015). Where Europeans encountered great powers to the East, they practiced strategies of deference and subordination. On the rare occasions when Europeans' discretion was not the better part of their valor, they suffered military defeat at the hands of Asian great powers. Europeans were also consistently defeated in their attempts at conquest in both North and sub-Saharan Africa in the early modern era.

Explaining early modern European expansion: Local allies and indigenous support

If the military revolution thesis cannot explain early modern European expansion, what can? This section argues that the most important determinant of Western successes were

local support and the cultivation of indigenous allies, combined with a judicious posture of European subservience when faced by far more powerful Asian empires. Especially in Africa and Asia, this strategy of insinuation and deference was crucially facilitated by Europeans' predominantly maritime orientation, meaning that they were perceived as generally unthreatening by land-oriented local polities. The exceptions tend to prove the rule, in that when Europeans took on Asian great powers, they lost, even in maritime conflicts when thanks to broadside-firing sailing ships, the former had their greatest technological advantage.

To make up for their lack of numbers, described earlier, local allies were decisive for European efforts to establish and defend their presence overseas (Black, 2004a: 221; Thompson, 1999: 144). Cortes was supported by tens of thousands of warriors from the local rivals of the Aztecs in the climactic battles. Rather than being a one-off, a heavy military and logistical dependence on Amerindians was a constant and fundamental feature of Spanish expansion in the region. Local sources from the time tended to see these campaigns as internecine Amerindian wars in which the Spanish played a cameo role (Restall, 2003: 46–50). Kamen (2002: 112) agrees that the single most important factor explaining Spanish expansion in the Americas was that “the conquerors always worked hand in hand with native peoples who opposed the ruling empire.” Lee (2011a: 11) goes even further in concluding that “in many ways we might explain European success and failures entirely as an issue of logistics, or, better, how well they succeeded in using indigenous aid to overcome the logistical challenges.”

The Portuguese presence in both the Swahili Coast of East Africa and in India depended upon exploiting local feuds to cultivate sympathetic rulers in order to establish key early bases, expand their influence, and then defend their outposts (Disney, 2009; Subrahmanyam, 2012). For example, the Portuguese headquarters of Goa was only saved from a rampaging Maratha army in 1683 by Mughal intervention; the Mughals later forced the Portuguese to pay for their rescue (Disney, 2009: 303). Elsewhere, small numbers of Portuguese fought alongside much larger armies from Ethiopia and Kongo (Thornton, 1999, 2007). However, there was nothing that mandated that European divide-and-rule tactics, even where they got purchase, resulted in European dominance. Thus, in discussing the consistent failure of European attempts at conquest in Africa in the early modern era, Thornton (2011: 168) notes of Angola:

Portugal achieved its results only with major assistance from indigenous armies, and it fit into the regional politics as just one of the players in a system of inter-state relations ... it was required to make major concessions to its allies and to accept alliances that had a high cost in regard to Portuguese control.

The Dutch East India Company also relied on local allies in besting the Portuguese in Malacca (the Sultan of Johor), Ceylon (Raja of Kandy), and South Asia (Sultan of Bijapur). The most important arena of Dutch presence in the East was the island of Java, where the company was sucked into a series of civil wars:

In the larger area of Javanese politics, the Dutch are shown being drawn farther and farther in by the unstable and highly personalized politics of the Javanese courts and then obtaining the

co-operation of Javanese rulers in some highly exploitative systems of forced-delivery monoculture (Wills, 1993: 99).

The company was seen by South-East Asian rulers as an attractive “gun for hire” in resolving succession struggles given its lack of connection to local societies, and relative indifference to territorial conquest compared with its maritime and commercial goals (Kian, 2008; Ricklefs, 1993). Even many of the “Dutch” company troops in fact hailed from other South-East Asian Sultanates, or from as far afield as Japan (Gaastra, 2003; Ricklefs, 1993).

The English East India Company’s rise to dominance in South Asia is unthinkable without local support. In the period of turbulence after the disintegration of the Mughal Empire in the early 18th century, the company formed extensive alliances among the successor polities. A large majority of its troops were recruited locally, some drilled to fight as European-style infantry, many others employed as irregular cavalry. As in the Americas and Africa, local logistical support was critical in determining the success or failure of campaigns, with company forces adopting Indian practices of resupply (Peers, 2007: 248; Roy, 2011: 210–211). Even in the area where the company might have been thought to be most self-sufficient, credit and finance, it depended on South Asian sources for up to 90% of its financing (Roy, 2013: 1139).

It is important to appreciate that these European–local collaborations generally served the interests of the latter as much as the former. It was not a question of locals being duped by the canny Westerners. Indeed, Africans, Asians, and those in the Americas enthusiastically and effectively played off rival European powers against each other. Overall, for Glete (2000: 77): “Major rulers, such as the Mughals in India or the Safavids in Persia usually co-operated with the Europeans who were regarded for a long time as useful partners on the maritime fringes of their essentially land-based empires.” Even Chase (2003: 202–203) agrees that the “European ‘empires’ of the 1500s and 1600s were networks of trading posts that existed largely at the sufferance of the local rulers.” As well as being a handy stick with which to beat local rivals, Europeans could also be a useful source of bullion for Eastern rulers.

European responses to non-Western great powers: Deference or defeat

One ahistorical perspective suggests that as European expansion progressed, the power of non-Western polities decline inversely, according to a zero-sum logic. In fact, however, particularly with reference to the empires of Asia, the construction of European maritime networks of trading posts and forts was often seen as a testament to local rulers’ power and prestige. In accord with conventional practice, Europeans were obliged to acknowledge their subservience to these rulers. With reference to the Mughals, Ming, and Tokugawa Shogunate, the English, Portuguese, and Dutch formally agreed to their inferior status and paid obeisance to Asian rulers in return for trading rights. More than just a matter of custom and ritual, this positioning also reflected the hard fact of European military weakness. There was no denying that these Asian powers enjoyed a vast military superiority (Andrade, 2016; Clulow, 2014; Gommans, 2002; Lorge, 2008; Richards,

1993). Even at home, Parker (1996 [1988]: 45) notes that in the period 1550–1650, no European power could maintain more than about 150,000 troops. By way of comparison, already by the late 1300s, the Ming Chinese had a conscript army of over 1.2 million (Laichen, 2003: 498; Lorge, 2005: 111). The Mughal military census of 1595 listed 384,000 cavalry and 4.66 million infantry (Gommans, 2002: 74).

Thus:

for the Mughals, the maritime activities of the Europeans were certainly not a matter of equal partnership, but rather the result of the benevolence and generosity they had shown to a subordinate community.... The Mughals regarded the Portuguese as their “unpaid servants” (Gommans, 2002: 164).

The English East India Company likewise had to pledge themselves as slaves of the Mughal Emperor. To prove their loyalty to the Japanese Shogun, Dutch emissaries were forced to crawl, trample crucifixes, and commit “to act in the service of the shogun and to preserve the Japanese realm with our last drop of blood” (Clulow, 2014: 18). Earlier, the Japanese had expelled the Portuguese and beheaded a delegation that sought to negotiate their re-entry. The Dutch company directors instructed their representatives in Persia to be equally deferential to the demands of the Safavid Shah (Boxer, 1965: 95). As is well known, the Chinese emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties forced the Europeans (and all other foreign emissaries) to kowtow as one part of the ritual endorsement and enactment of the supreme status of the Middle Kingdom and the celestial emperor. The Portuguese toehold in Macau was very much at the mercy of local Chinese officials, and as late as the 1780s, Portuguese attempts to usurp sovereign prerogatives over the territory were firmly rebuffed (Disney, 2009: 344). Further afield, even in areas like West Africa that lacked the huge empires of the East, European outposts only existed and functioned thanks to the tolerance of African rulers (Quirk and Richardson, 2014: 144, 153; Vandervort, 1998: 26–27).

If European deference and subordination were the norm in the early modern period, what happened in the exceptional cases when they sought to directly challenge non-Western great powers? In particular, what was the strategic effect of European attempts to leverage their tactical naval superiority in cannon-armed sailing ships vis-a-vis land-based Asian great powers? Although these clashes were rare enough that conclusions can only be tentative, the clear pattern was that the Europeans lost. Even when they scored tactical victories at sea, the brute fact was that Europeans depended on access to Asian markets far more than Asian rulers depended on trade with the Europeans. Furthermore, the fiscal, military, and ideational nature of these polities, even that of Japan, was firmly land-based, meaning that they were essentially invulnerable to maritime coercion (Andrade, 2004: 443). Thus, the exceptional clashes prove why the Europeans were generally so realistic in recognizing their inferiority.

When European forces fought against the Ming and Qing Chinese in the early modern period, they came off distinctly second best. The Portuguese and Dutch East India Company sought to force open Chinese markets a century apart through campaigns of blockade, piracy, and attacks on ports. In 1521–1522, the Portuguese were defeated in naval clashes with the Ming Chinese in the Pearl River Delta (Andrade, 2015). In 1624,

the threat of a huge Ming army and being excluded from the Chinese market forced the Dutch East India Company to abandon the Pescadores Islands (Andrade, 2004). Later, the company was expelled from its new-style *trace italienne* fortress in Taiwan after an amphibious operation by Chinese forces in 1661 (Andrade, 2013). Inland, Russian Cossacks were sharply defeated by Qing Chinese in the Amur Valley in 1654, 1658, and again 1685–1689 (Andrade, 2016: 193–194, 219). The Europeans were so intimidated by the Japanese tendency for disproportionate retaliation that they carefully abstained from attacking even unarmed Japanese merchant ships far from home. On the occasion where some Portuguese killed a few Japanese sailors, the Shogun captured and burned a great Portuguese merchant ship and its cargo, at the time (1610) worth more than the entire capital of the Dutch East India Company (Clulow, 2009: 85).

Europeans were too weak to engage in territorial conquests in South Asia until after the Mughal Empire began to break up in the 1700s, but there were occasional collisions with the Mughals. One of the most significant saw the East India Company attempt to force the Mughals to rescind an increase in customs duties in 1686. Over the next four years, “the Mughals succeeded in imposing a crushing defeat on the English and in driving them out of their settlements” (Hasan, 1991: 360). The company was forced to petition for forgiveness as “most humble and repentant” servants of the emperor. This salutary experience meant that as late as the 1720s, when the empire was in terminal decline thanks to chronic succession struggles and uprisings, the East India Company was still wary of Mughal military power (Watson, 1980: 80).

Despite their terrestrial orientation, Asian powers chalked up some feats of naval prowess at least equal to their European counterparts. The series of Chinese gun-armed naval expeditions to the Indian Ocean during 1405–1433 reached as far as East Africa, involving up to 26,000 men in a single fleet, far greater than the Portuguese, Dutch, or English managed for centuries afterwards. On this basis, Glete (2000: 89) maintains that the Ming emperors possessed “all the necessary preconditions to develop a maritime empire in Asia and even in America and Europe.” Earlier, the Chinese naval battle of Lake Poyang in 1363 involved total forces of 500,000 (Andrade, 2016: 58). The Japanese invasion of Korea in the 1590s began with ferrying an army of 160,000 across the sea (Lorge, 2008: 82). Even the Ottoman force of 10,000 janissaries and sailors that sailed to Western India in 1538 was the largest in the Indian Ocean since the Chinese fleets of the previous century, and once again was far larger than any European waterborne force in the region until almost 200 years later (Casale, 2010: 59). There were also notable non-Western innovations in naval technology: the Koreans used armor-plated cannon-armed ships as early as the 16th century (Glete, 2000: 90–91; Swope, 2005). In sum, not only did Europeans have no monopoly in the maritime projection of force, but in some ways the most impressive feats of amphibious warfare in this era were accomplished by Asians.

The Asian conquest of Europe

The final indication of how misleading the military revolution thesis is in understanding relations between the West and “the rest” concerns the Ottoman Empire, for at the same

time that Europeans were conquering parts of Asia, Asians were conquering much larger and more significant parts of Europe. Once again reflecting Eurocentric biases in both the social sciences and history, the significance of this fact is often seriously under-appreciated.

The Ottoman Empire represents a major anomaly for the military revolution literature. As Guilmartin (1995: 303) observes: "The Military Revolution is generally understood as the product of a Europe to which the Ottomans were external" (see also Agoston, 2014: 86; Kadercan, 2013/2014: 119–121). This omission is particularly striking given that they were a non-European power engaged in major warfare with European great powers for centuries, and long posed an existential threat to many Christian polities. Given this prolonged, sustained, and high-intensity warfare, one might have thought that there was no better place to look for early modern military innovation and a distinctively Western style of warfare than in the campaigns waged against the Ottomans (Agoston, 2005: 6; Black, 1998: 87; Kadercan, 2013/2014: 117–118). In the European context, the Ottomans have been referred to as the superpower of the early modern era (Kadercan, 2013/2014: 130; Murphey, 1999: 53). Yet, despite being judged as too backward to fit the modernizing military revolution template, the Ottomans did not seem to suffer any loss of inherent competitiveness against Western forces (Black, 2004a: 218; 2004b: 76, 84; Guilmartin, 1995: 283). For all the explosive growth in the territory under the sway of Western European powers in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Balkans and North Africa saw mainly European defeats at the hands of Ottoman and other Islamic opponents (Black, 1998: 44–46; Cook, 1994). In the period 1650–1750, Europeans were progressively expelled by Muslim opponents from East Africa, the Middle East, and North Africa (Black, 1998: 111; Marshall, 1980: 21–24).

It seems that the Ottomans anticipated the military revolution in several important respects. From the early 1500s, they had a much more advanced and professional system of logistics, administration, and finance than did European polities (Agoston, 2005: 9; Parrott, 2012: 30, 199). As a result, they were able to deploy and sustain much larger permanent armies (said to be the primary marker of the modern fiscal-military state) than even the most powerful Christian rulers (Agoston, 2014; Black, 2004b; Murphey, 1999). They deployed modern artillery and were leaders in siege warfare, whether it was against the last remnants of the Byzantine Empire in 1453 or the new *trace italienne* fortifications of the Habsburgs. Rather than any sign of inevitable decline, Ottoman reverses in the 1690s more likely reflect the impact of diplomacy, as the Habsburgs, Venice, Poland, and Russia waged an unusually coordinated campaign associated with the Sacred League alliance, while the Ottomans were without their vassals, the Crimean Tatars (Agoston, 2014: 124; Murphey, 1999: 10). Much is made of the Ottoman defeat before the walls of Vienna in 1683. However, as even Parker (1995: 356) notes, "it must be remembered that it was the Turks at the gates of Vienna and not the Europeans at the gates of Istanbul." The Ottomans managed to inflict serious defeats on the Russians and Habsburgs in 1711 and 1737–1739 (Black, 1998: 104). Although they were outclassed after this, unlike the Spanish, Portuguese, French, Swedes, Poles, Dutch, and Holy Roman Empire, the Ottomans remained unconquered and held on to most of their territory into the late 19th century.

Conclusion

The military revolution thesis continues to exercise a strong hold on key IR and social science precepts, especially in relation to the emergence and triumph of the sovereign state, and how Europe managed to dominate the rest of the world. Despite this prominence, the thesis is poorly supported by evidence, due in large part to the dissimilarities in how Europeans conducted wars at home and abroad. The excessive focus on Europe undermines key causal claims about the relationship between technological and institutional change, as well as obscuring theoretical insights from other regions. Reading history through the lens of current outcomes has exaggerated the importance of Western states at the expense of non-Western powers. Events like the Ottoman conquest of South-East Europe and North Africa, the Mughal conquest of most of the Indian sub-continent, and the Manchu conquest of China are seen as fleeting and unrepresentative historical curios, while relatively brief periods of success like those of the Dutch and Swedes are seen as being of epochal and enduring importance. Quantitative IR works that are based on explicitly Eurocentric data sets, such as the *Correlates of War* and *Great Power Wars 1495–1815*, have been shown to be profoundly misleading in the conclusions they suggest about international systems (Butcher and Griffiths, forthcoming; Fazal, 2007; Kang, 2014).

How would or should we see the world differently through addressing the bias of Eurocentrism? A more scientific, less ethnocentric perspective giving due weight to regions beyond Europe would show Western dominance of the international system as atypical, and thus make it much less surprising that this dominance is now being challenged. A multipolar global civilizational order becomes the historical rule rather than the exception. Levy (1983: 10) reasons that because European great powers have supposedly dominated the globe for five centuries, most of our IR knowledge and theory is derived from the European great power system, “and so the most valid lessons for the future presumably can be learned from this system.” Following this logic, if the initial premise of 500 years of global European domination is wrong, as this article has argued, what does this say about our existing scholarship and predictions?

It is important to stress that none of these problems is inherently a problem of IR theory. In principle, the field could have just as much realist, constructivist, or Marxist theory of African international politics, for example, as it does concerning the European international system; most IR scholars have simply chosen not to pursue this option. The call for broadening the questions that IR scholars ask and the range of evidence considered to give due weight to all regions of the world is consistent with almost all theoretical orientations, and in keeping with these theories’ ambitions to explain international politics in general. The limits of the field are instead very much those of research design and concept formation. In principle, they are not difficult to solve, but in practice, they continue to endure, despite critiques.

The final point is to emphasize that historians and political scientists have much more in common than is often realized. Both fields are belatedly struggling to overcome an entrenched Eurocentrism. Political scientists have taken up general theories first developed by historians. The idea of a division of labor whereby historians provide the detailed, descriptive, historical raw material for social scientists to turn into causal claims

and general theory is a false and unhelpful dichotomy. Instead, scholars from these different fields are working in very similar enterprises, and so the potential for each to learn from and benefit from the other is much greater than is commonly assumed.

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