SOLDIERS ON THE RAMPAGE

Since few states in seventeenth-century Europe could support their armies, the armies took matters into their own hands. The results were horrifying.

by John A. Lynn

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Jacques Callot was a French painter and engraver who portrayed the unheroic reality of 17th-century war. The engraving opposite, **Plundering a Large Farmhouse,** *from his series* **Misères de guerre,** *vividly illustrates the worst abuses of soldiery run amok—theft, murder, torture, and rape.*

On an October day in 1650, a menacing swarm of 3,000 soldiers demanded entry into Sancoins, a town some thirty miles southeast of Bourges in the heart of France. Although these were not enemy troops, the citizens bolted the gates because the ragged warriors lacked written authorization to quarter in Sancoins. However, the persistent soldiers per-

suaded a few traitors from the town to lead them to an unguarded gate. Once in Sancoins, they stole, pillaged, and raped as they pleased.

They extorted a ransom of 4,000 livres (French pounds), thirty horses, and other goods from the inhabitants. But their savagery reached its nadir in the torture they reserved for nursing mothers and infants. Seizing the babies from their mothers' breasts, soldiers locked the children away for twenty-four hours. The tormented mothers could free their helpless babies only by having sex with the jailers or by giving them more money.

While documents record the events of that autumn rampage, there is no evidence that the perpetrators were-

ever punished. They marched out of Sancoins and out of reach.

The devastation of Sancoins typifies the treatment of civilians by soldiers in the seventeenth century. Such scenes of brutality are commonly associated with the Thirty Years' War (1618–48) in Germany, where, some claim, as much as one-third of the population died from the lethal side effects of war. However, the terror spread beyond Germany and continued past 1648. Excesses committed by French forces during their war with Spain (1635–59) equaled those of the Germans and Swedes in central Europe, and extensive destruction in the Netherlands and Germany continued through the 1680s.

In defiance of military law and discipline, rapacious roving bands of soldiers plundered for their own benefit. At the same time, but in accord with the customs of war, armies raised funds for their maintenance through a more regular, but ultimately still violent, system of "contributions." Somewhere between these two poles of illicit and legal violence, commanders sent out raiding parties both to secure supplies for their forces and to deny them to the foe. Officially sanctioned, such raids often resulted in barbarities identical to the actions of marauding criminals.

Those who bore the responsibility for keeping armies in the field knew full well that the cruel treatment of civilians was not just unavoidable but necessary. Violent extortion peaked during the seventeenth century because armies grew to unprecedented proportions, creating ever greater demands on the states they fought for—demands that became harder and harder to fulfill. When states failed to maintain their forces adequately, soldiers faced three alternatives: starve, desert, or plunder. Many deserted, and many plundered. To keep their armies intact, generals and states tolerated or organized this plunder—ignoring its attendant brutality—to provide the wherewithal for the new, larger armies.

Hans Jacob Christoph von Grimmelshausen, the seventeenth-century German author, blamed the greed of a debased soldiery for the horrors he witnessed. He claimed that as a lad of twelve or thirteen he had looked on as a band of raiders pillaged his Hessian town. Losing his home, he had shouldered a musket himself not long after. Later in life he wrote the immensely popular picaresque tale *Der Abenteuerliche Simplicissimus* (*The Adventurous Simplicius*), a series of adventures that closely parallel Grimmelshausen's own life. Through the title character, Simplicius, Grimmelshausen provided the best description of raiding by small parties, certainly the most common of war's terrors, but also the most shadowy, since it was rarely reported in detail. Writing of a party of heavy cavalry that drove Simplicius from his boyhood home, he says:

> [Some] raced through the house, ransacking upstairs and down. . . . Still others bundled up big packs of cloth, household goods, and clothes. What they did not intend to take along they broke and spoiled. Some shook the feathers out of beds and put bacon slabs, hams, and other stuff in the ticking. . . . Others knocked down the hearth and broke the windows. . . . They flattened out copper and pewter dishes and baled the ruined goods. They burned up bedsteads, tables, chairs, and benches. . . .
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> They stretched the hired man out flat on the ground, stuck a wooden wedge in his

ANNE S.K. BROWN MILITARY COLLECTION, BROWN UNIVERSITY, PROVIDENCE, R.I.

Reasons

ANNE S.K. BROWN MILITARY COLLECTION, BROWN UNIVERSITY, PROVIDENCE, R.I.

Villages that did not comply with an army's demands for money could be burned to the ground. The **Brandmeister** *(fire master) in this engraving applies the torch.*

mouth to keep it open, and emptied a milk bucket full of stinking manure drippings down his throat; they called it a Swedish cocktail. . . . By this means they forced him to take a raiding party to some other place where they carried off men and cattle and brought them to our farm. Then they used thumbscrews, which they cleverly made out of their pistols, to torture the peasants. . . . Though he had confessed to nothing as yet, they put one of the captured hayseeds in the bake-oven and lighted a fire in it. They put a rope around someone else's head and tightened it like a tourniquet until blood came out of his mouth, nose, and ears. . . . I can't say much about the captured wives, hired girls, and daughters because the soldiers didn't let me watch their doings. But I do remember hearing pitiful screams from various dark corners. . . .

Since this pillage existed outside the law, it did not discriminate between friend and foe. Troops proved as likely to pillage towns loyal to the prince they served as they were to plunder enemy bastions. While raiding parties could leave a village in ruins, an army could devastate an entire city or province. In 1649, while campaigning against the Norman capital of Rouen, the comte d'Harcourt's royal army based itself at Le Neubourg for twelve days. According to a petition from Le Neubourg's town fathers, the troops caused "total ruin." They "burned more than 200 buildings besides losses of animals, wheat, and other grains such that the majority of the inhabitants were forced to abandon the area and are reduced to begging."

Such violence bred violence. Later in his wanderings, Simplicius witnessed the plundering and burning of a town by cavalry. Suddenly, "an armed gang of peasants like an angry swarm of yellow jackets came charging out of the woods. They raised such a ghastly war whoop, attacked so furiously, and fired **so savagely that my hair stood on end." Enraged peasants drove off the cavalry, who threw away their booty in their flight. Others massacred the raiders and even buried one alive in a barrel.**

Greed undoubtedly inspired some of the excesses, but greed cannot explain it all. Disciplinary actions might have curbed such base inhumanity; there was little conviction in the mid-seventeenth century that such measures alone would stem the tide of brutality sweeping over Europe. Certainly there was no reluctance to inflict the most hideous punishments on the guilty.

A close reading of contemporary documents leaves little doubt as to the cause of violence directed by soldiers against the surrounding population. When rulers of countries and commanders of armies failed to fulfill their part of the contract with the soldiers—when they failed to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, and payment for services—their troops turned ugly. This was understood by the leaders to be a natural consequence, and they therefore tended to look the other way—or to excuse the behavior—when soldiers went on the rampage.

Rulers' faults

A letter written in 1649 by the experienced military administrator Charles Machaut to the secretary of state for war, Michel Le Tellier, establishes that high-ranking officials recognized what circumstances would drive soldiers to employ violence, and that such lamentable acts were understandable, even excusable. Machaut insisted that the instructions Le Tellier had just sent him for winter quarters were "a complete impossibility" unless the minister doubled the men's pay. The soldiers "are all naked," he said, and while "they will have nothing," they "will see their hosts drink and eat well."

Machaut reasoned that "it is better to institute laws and regulations that can be observed and to punish the infractions than to propose . . . austere ones that are not executed. . . ." He said that Le Tellier must already have known these problems "by reason and experience," and that if the men "did not have what they needed, in my conscience, I could not punish them, whatever order I might receive to the contrary." He then mused, "it is only peace that can bring the remedies you

seek for the pain and suffering of the people. As long as war lasts, the soldiers, with their vices and rapines, are necessary to you." He next offered an extended religious argument that men were flawed and might be forgiven their sins if the state did not fulfill its obligations to them. Jesus had "censured those who blamed the apostles for having gathered stalks of grain in the fields of others, since the necessities of life and the covering of nudity are such pressing things."

An ordinance of 1651 provided a royal admission that "the disorders committed by my soldiers going to assembly areas . . . have resulted from the poor quality of . . . quartering and from the lack of food-stocks on their routes. . . ." Perhaps the most damning statement appeared in 1660 in the ordinance that granted amnesty to French soldiers and civilians guilty of illegal acts during the preceding war with Spain. Louis XIV justified this sweeping pardon by arguing that "we know that the disorders committed by our soldiers have only proceeded for the most part from their lack of pay."

Plunder was compensation. A report on the conduct of German troops near Reims during 1649 states that the soldiers "proclaimed loudly that they had been given Champagne as pay and prey." As Louis XIV stated in his memoirs for the year 1666: "Of late, some commanders are found who have made great armies subsist for a long time without giving them any pay other than the license of pillaging everywhere." Doubtless, there was a link between the recourse to plunder and the kind of individuals attracted by it. As the *Mercure français* stated in 1622, "One finds enough soldiers when one gives them the freedom to live off the land, and allowing them to pillage supports them without pay."

Not all armies were ill provisioned. Holland and England, for example, were prosperous countries, run by mercantile classes, and better able to mobilize money and credit for war. As a result their armies were better cared for than some other European armies—and better disciplined on the whole.

Later in the seventeenth century, generals and the states they served regularized the extortion of the populace by levying "contributions." This evolved in Germany early in the Thirty Years' War. Circa 1600 the term *contribution* described a war tax levied within a given realm, with the consent of that area's estates. Thus, it was raised in a regular manner, by consent, and over a reasonably large area. Its proceeds benefited the state's treasury.

Brandschatzung (fire tax) served as the other ancestor of the later form of contribution. Officers, from captain to general, with a band of soldiers answering their commands, extracted payments in kind or money from abbeys, villages, and towns under threat of fire. *Brandschatzung* was neither regular nor consensual, and it was not applicable to a large area, since it could be imposed on no larger area than could be burned in a single conflagration. In addition *Brandschatzung* filled the local commander's purse, whereas the earlier contributions had gone to the prince's war chest.

Contributions achieved their new form by 1625 under the infamous German commander Albrecht von Wallenstein. During the Thirty Years' War, Wallenstein raised a large army for the Holy Roman emperor and supported it by levying contributions. They were now exactions in money, imposed over a sizable area and paid in a regular fashion, usually during an extended period of time. The local army commander set and apportioned the amount and backed his demands with the threat of violence, essentially burning. Eventually, all the contestants in the Thirty Years' War in Germany funded their armies through contributions. The customs of war recognized the legitimacy of the practice and set standards for it.

When generals received contributions, they were supposed to share the take with their colonels. If they did not, the latter might become incensed. The Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus had to transfer one general to a new command because when he failed to distribute contributions he had raised, his colonels refused to serve under him.

After the Thirty Years' War, contributions became more regular and were more likely to go to the state than to the general. While the French had not raised many contributions before the close of the war with Spain in 1659, they exploited the practice with a vengeance in their later conflicts, and probably brought it to the highest level of sophistication and productivity. In effect, pillage by the state replaced pillage by individual soldiers—although the state was more discriminating than marauding troops had been. While the armies of Louis XIV imposed contributions on areas outside French borders, the king effectively forbade the levying of contributions or pillaging by his troops in French villages and towns.

Louis wrote in his historical memoirs for 1666: "Any prince who cherishes his reputation . . . will not doubt that it is founded as much upon defending the goods of his subjects from pillage by his own troops as defending against pillage by his enemies." He backed up his intentions with improved military administration and supply and with rigorous disciplinary codes that held not only common soldiers but also their officers responsible for infractions. While the change did not come overnight, he ultimately stopped his army from raiding his own population.

Following France's twenty-four-year war with Spain in the mid-seventeenth century, the process of assessing contributions became more rational and reasonable. French officials usually set the level of contributions outside of France as a percentage of prewar tax rolls. In the best of circumstances, assessing contributions involved some sort of bargaining process to achieve the consent of those burdened with the new payment. By the 1670s towns in occupied countries would be notified of the contributions demanded of them by printed forms, with blanks filled in by the local French commander.

The bureaucratic niceties gave a deceptively peaceful appearance to an essentially violent process. "Executions"—the burning of villages and towns that failed to pay the contributions assigned them—revealed the brutal nature of this official extortion. The system had become more controlled, but to the village that fell victim to a party of troops sent on a round of executions, soldiers were still on the rampage.

Burning out someone who resisted your will remained a common method of warfare. As the duke of Luxembourg attested in 1672, "Attacks of fever have

CHRISTIAN RICHTER / STAATLICHE GRAPHISCHE SAMMLUNG, MUNICH

The marauder here seems to have sex as well as thievery on his mind. Soldiers often extorted money by threatening rape—or extorted sex by threatening injury to babies.

never been as regular as our custom of burning out every other day those who were stupid enough to oblige us to do so." The son of Michel Le Tellier, François-Michel Le Tellier, Louis XIV's minister of war, continually urged executions of towns delinquent in payments. However, he shares responsibility with his monarch, since he seems to have been expressing Louis's preferences. After the minister's death in 1691, the king told Field Marshal Nicolas Catinat, "It is terrible to be obliged to burn villages in order to bring people to pay the contribution, but since neither by menace nor by sweetness can one oblige them to pay, it is necessary to continue to use these rigors."

From the outset of the Dutch War (1672–78) through the end of the Nine Years' War (the War of the Grand Alliance, 1688–97), contributions escalated in a kind of duel in the Spanish Netherlands and along the embattled northeast frontier of France. Again and again printed demands by the French, for example, state that since Spain, or another country, has made such exorbitant demands, the village of so-and-so is ordered to pay the king's agents such-and-such an amount; but if the offending foe relents, then so will the French. It is worth noting that Louis XIV was conscious that his demands for contributions would precipitate enemy levies. In 1672 he even decided to limit the extent of contributions demanded from Holland, because he knew that such demands would expose French areas to enemy impositions.

At the same time, the French exacted an escalating toll of reprisals for enemy executions. Repeated orders condemned anywhere from two to a hundred enemy villages or houses to be burned for every one under Louis's protection that was reduced to ashes. The most common multiplier was ten or twenty. Such reprisals were apparently designed to affect public opinion and to put pressure on Spanish officials. When Le Tellier ordered Charles, comte de Montal, to burn twenty villages near Charleroi because the Spanish had burned outbuildings on the extremities of two French villages, he was to "throw around some broadsides [billets] that said that this was a reprisal for the burning of the two barns." Montal was ordered to leave not a single house in the twenty villages.

When reprisals failed to keep contributions within bounds during the Dutch War, the French and Spanish tried to cap contributions and executions through treaty agreement. Representatives of the warring sides met at Deynse from 1676 to 1678, and although these sessions failed to produce a formal treaty, they did lead to an agreement that, for a time, set contributions at a more reasonable rate and strictly limited executions. These restrictions lapsed in the last months of the war, however, and an attempt to revive them at the outset of the Nine Years' War was stillborn.

With the failures both to deter contributions by reprisals and to limit them by treaty, the next logical step was to wall out the enemy from the areas the French wished to reserve for their own benefit. Thus, engineers designed fortified trench lines and strings of outposts during the Nine Years' War and, especially, the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14). These barriers were not meant to stop major armies but to keep out raiding parties. And there was nothing particularly admirable about these efforts to protect the population: It was a question of fencing out the foxes so the hens could continue laying eggs to fill French baskets.

The exact tally of contributions will probably never be known. Certainly they were the most important element in funding the Thirty Years' War in central Europe. The noted historian

WILLEM CORNELISZ DUYSTER / STAATLICHE KUNSTSAMMLUNGEN, DRESDEN

Michael Roberts estimates that through contributions to support their war efforts, the Swedes raised ten to twelve times as much as they gained from revenues at home. Wallenstein functioned almost totally on the basis of contributions. Before 1659, the French raised significant funds from contributions and through other forms of extortion from their own population. After 1659, contributions seem to have constituted a large part of the military budget. Immediately after the death of Le Tellier in 1691, two treasurers of the military accounts stated that they had a cache of 18 million livres amassed from contributions from Flanders and other economies. This was at a time when the entire official war budget amounted to 94.5 million livres—hence just the funds mentioned by these treasurers would have equaled 19 percent of military revenues. Clearly, even though military administration ran more smoothly in the late seventeenth century, the army still depended on contributions to satisfy its financial needs.

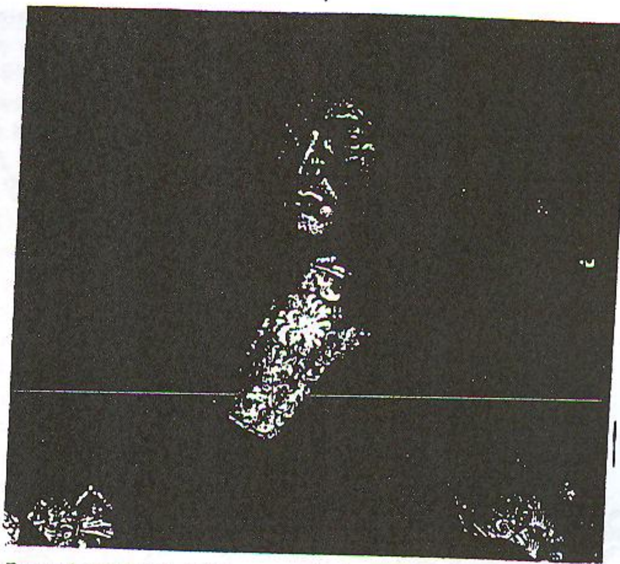
A welcome aspect of the transition from extortion by marauding soldiers to the more refined extortion of contributions was the decline in rape. Not that soldiers ceased sexual attacks in the late seventeenth century, but such offenses became far less common and were prosecuted more diligently. Early in the century, rape seemed inextricably bound to marauding. Grimmelshausen wrote: "Foraging is defined as riding out to the villages and, with danger to life and limb, threshing, grinding, and baking, grabbing and stealing whatever is handy, maltreating and abusing peasants and even ruining their women, daughters, and hired girls." That soldiers were ill paid and ill supplied does not seem to explain rape, which at first glance appears remote from their need for material sustenance.

The most plausible explanation for the prevalence of rape during the first half of the seventeenth century rests on the human tendency to go too far when

Spanish soldiers in the foreground of this painting of the siege of Freiburg (1641–42) are a typically ragged crowd. By now armies had far outgrown their governments' capacity to support them.

ALTE PINAKOTHEK, MUNICH / ARTOTHEK, PEISSENBERG

The German general Albrecht von Wallenstein legalized and standardized the collection of "contributions" to an occupying army. Payments could be made over a period of time.

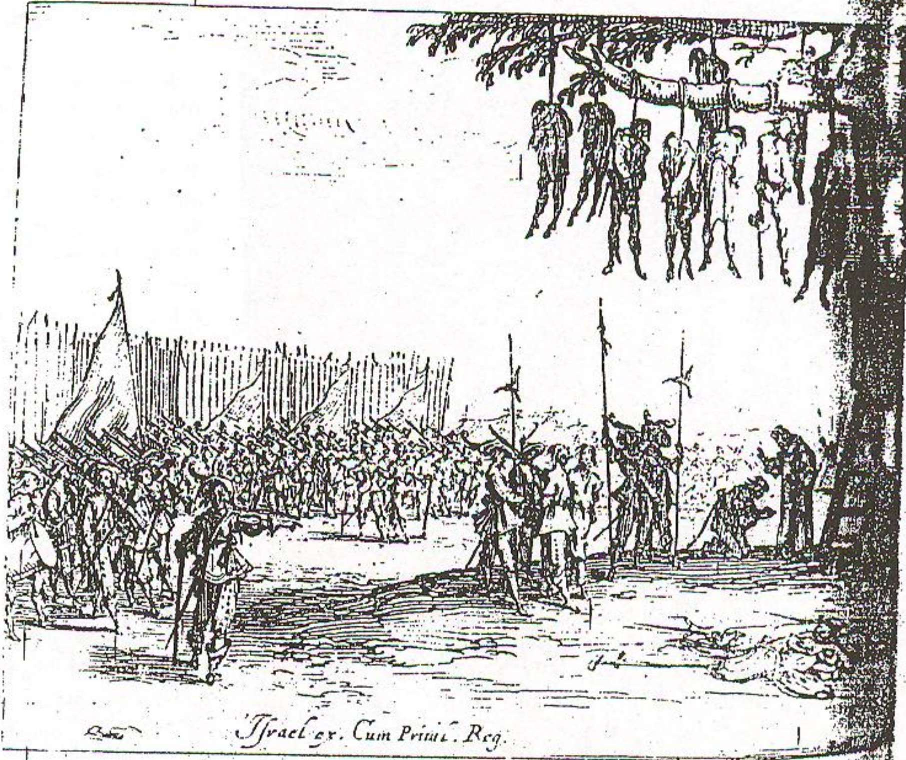


MUSÉE ST.-DENIS, REIMS / ROGER VIOLLET

François-Michel Le Tellier, marquis de Louvois, who was Louis XIV's war minister and chief adviser, continually urged "executions" (burnings) of towns delinquent in contributions.

Roving bands of destitute soldiers—who plundered at least partly to stay alive—could reduce an entire village to ruins, its inhabitants to begging. However, these well-dressed and -armed musketeers, quarreling among themselves over spoils, hardly appear needy.

***Revenge:** In the two etchings at the top of these pages, peasants are chopping and choking some soldiers they have waylaid and pulled from their horses. At bottom, Callot's* **The Hanging** *depicts the public execution of some pillagers. It was a brutal century.*



a taboo is broken. Thus when hungry soldiers crossed into the illicit realm of theft and torture, they also attacked women. While a degree of military machismo undoubtedly compelled some men to enforce their masculinity, it is probably going too far to claim that for most soldiers of the seventeenth century, rape was really about power, rather than about sex—as analysts of the problem argue today. For men whose notion of sexual intercourse could not have risen much higher than the mechanical and mercenary sex of camp prostitutes, sex must have been seen as little more than a commodity. For them it was a necessity with a price on it, to be seized from women through violence the way money was taken from men through torture.

A gruesome case of mass rape, dating from 1652, illustrates another way in which rape was linked to the soldiers' material want—as a form of leverage to extort money. Troops under the command of the comte d'Harcourt left tales of horror in southern France:

> The men of Condom, who had been taxed only 30,000 livres, paid 64,000 to exempt their women from violation, after which they were pillaged and lost fifteen hundred horses. . . . One young girl, having been raped by eighty soldiers before being rescued, later was seen in a wood being pursued and finally trapped; she died at that very moment from fright.

While soldiers might rape with the frenzy of feeding sharks, they might also hold back to use the threat of rape as an effective tool of extortion. In another case, one company of the regiment commanded by the duc d'Enghien ran riot in Oger, near Reims, on April 14, 1649. They seized local women and threatened to dishonor them if not paid a ransom of 3,000 livres. The ransom was paid, the women were released, and then the citizens looked on as troops torched their town.

Demanding money on threat of rape carried more force than demanding money on threat of burning, because rape was considered an ultimate offense. This is why the men of Condom and Oger ransomed their wives and daughters even though they knew the soldiers would still pillage the towns. Correspondence of the time continually mentioned rape both because it was common and because it was so heinous a crime. The king shared his subjects' values. When Louis XIV issued his ordi-

ANNE S.K. BROWN MILITARY COLLECTION, BROWN UNIVERSITY, PROVIDENCE R.I.

crimes committed by soldiers and civilians during the war with Spain, he specifically pardoned murder, but he excluded rape from the amnesty. Such an offense could not be forgiven.

Why did soldiers turn to brutal extortion in the seventeenth century? Most did it because of physical want and lack of discipline. It was a way to put a bit of food in their stomachs and a bit of money in their purses. Very few soldiers dragged home sacks of booty, although it is true that once plunder became the norm, it tended to attract men who hoped for spoils. Still, it was not the men who created the practice but the practice that drew the men. The Dutch and English examples show that the system could be different when the will and resources were there. Of course, the French did it eventually not so much by ending all pillage as by transforming it into a formal, state-directed activity.

In fact, soldiers on the rampage, either raiding for themselves or extorting contributions for some higher authority, tell us something fundamental about the expansion of armies and the growth of states in Europe. Most historians today would argue that as the European economy developed and administration became more sophisticated, states grew in wealth and authority, and as they did, they created larger armies. But this chain of causation ought to be reversed. As populations expanded and foreign policies grew more ambitious, armies grew—in the French case expanding sevenfold, topping out at a peacetime level of 150,000 and a wartime level of 400,000, at least on paper. States could not immediately satisfy the needs of such gargantuan forces; therefore, rulers and administrators scrambled to develop greater authority and tap greater resources. Eventually states even harnessed their economies to serve military necessity. But there was a gap between the needs of the expanded armies and the capacity of states to fulfill them, and when the states fell short of paying and feeding their armies, the soldiers went on the rampage.

The price paid for larger armies was not simply higher taxes; in addition, states permitted and eventually sponsored forms of extortion to supplement what could be provided by less violent means. Such excesses could be stopped only if armies decreased in size or states grew into their armies. The latter is what happened. By the mid-eighteenth century the modern bureaucratic state had evolved, largely as a by-product of military expansion.

JOHN A. LYNN is associate professor of history at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and chairman of the Midwest Consortium on Military History. His book *The Bayo-*