

## Book Reviews

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**David Potter. *Henry VIII and Francis I: The Final Conflict, 1540-1547*. History in Warfare series. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011. ISBN 978-90-04-20431-7. Pp. xxix, 562. Hardcover. €187,00/ \$249.00.**

The title of this book is a misleading one. One would expect to find here an account of the last war between Henry VIII and Francis I, almost forgotten by laymen and seemingly insignificant to historians. Contents of such books are predictable: diplomacy, preparations and planning for campaigns, army organisation, blow by blow battle operations, logistics, supply, warts and all. Everything mentioned above is present here, but then David Potter unexpectedly delves deeper down the rabbit hole. The narrative is so detailed, so precise that it is no longer a mere list of events meant for referencing rather than for pleasure reading. As one dives into the minutiae of the struggle for Boulogne, *The Final Conflict* emerges as a vivid portrait of an enigmatic era in the history of warfare, an explanation of so much more than simple reasons for victory or defeat in a single campaign. The author has definitely succeeded in his declared intention to show the war as a far wider and more destructive conflict than it looks at first sight, as well as to define its long-term implications. (p. 1) This is a good illustration of the whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. When the author gathers information for some narrow theme, he has more control over the result. When, however, the aim is to provide as much information as possible about some significant events, the text usually gains the ability to express more than the author intended. It was a very interesting experience to read this book, because different unconnected things are described here chronologically as they happened, while we are used to visible causal structures. However, that level of detail creates the liveliest picture of early modern diplomacy and warfare one can imagine.

The chapter structure of the book is both chronological and thematic, which is a sensible approach for this particular, rather compact campaign. We start with diplomacy that was required to forge an alliance amidst mutual suspicions. Then the French game in Scotland gets the necessary attention, as well as the cautious slide towards war. Finally, there are chapters on the actual invasion into France, English military organisation, renewal of the war, a chapter on English-French competition for landsknechts in Germany, a chapter on naval warfare, and finally the chapters on the mediation and the peace treaty. In the end there is little to criticise about the narrative itself. It is very dense and the theme is masterfully researched. No one has ever written about this war in such a way. But there are bigger issues that come to mind after finishing the book.

The first lesson we learn here is to restrain ourselves from judging wars by their direct results. On the surface the final 'hurrah' of the two archetypal Renaissance monarchs seems botched. The joint invasion of France by Henry VIII and Charles V didn't happen as intended, Francis I wasn't brought to his knees as was the plan, and the whole affair lacked large-scale pitched battles, something that automatically scares away most traditional military historians. The operations ran on a very limited geographical scale, the English preferring to fight for tangible results rather than to charge into the heart of France; and in the end Charles V made a separate peace, forcing Henry to do the same and be satisfied with the capture of Boulogne. Furthermore, soon afterwards the city was sold back to France and the status quo was reinstated. Certainly, in terms of material success this is

not even close to Henry V's glittering campaign of 1415; but the result speaks nothing of the forces in play and the stakes in that game of thrones.

Francis I faced the most dangerous threat of his reign while Henry VIII launched the most ambitious English force of the sixteenth century. The fact that comparatively poor and backward England waged war on such a grand scale demands our attention no less than the French efforts required for organising defence on two fronts and breaking the Tudor-Habsburg alliance. Every military undertaking has its challenges but in the sixteenth century rulers had to operate in unique circumstances. Organization of society and government were tuned to wars of the previous era for the large part, while mentality and weaponry demanded more complex methods. It seems that sieges and skirmishes of the campaign in question by themselves are less interesting than the challenges of bringing together such numerous forces and supplying them with bread, beer, wood, gunpowder, and ammunition. All of it required considerable efforts due to the cumbersome institutions of the day. Particularly useful are the frequent comparisons between English and French practices that show a clear distinction between a country that for the previous years had largely stayed out of major wars and a country that had endured decades of bitter struggle continuously since 1494. Since the medieval retinues of the summoned lords had become outdated, they had to be supported by veteran mercenaries. However, to hire these mercenaries Henry VIII had to send agents with little experience to negotiate with German princes while skilful French agents with extensive connections in lands of the Emperor did everything to thwart English efforts. In many ways the wars of the sixteenth century required more skill from rulers and commanders than wars of subsequent centuries.

The book is also very helpful at explaining why simplistic views on Renaissance diplomacy fail to help us understand these conflicts. John R. Hale and Frank Tallett<sup>1</sup> have written a lot about

different causes for early modern wars with special attention to dynastic ambitions. 'Rivalry of kings' or 'royal sport' have long been a staple summary of sixteenth century wars for many other authors. However, it is better to study these wars one by one instead of attempting to grasp them at a glance. Potter explains Henry VIII and Francis I's quarrel less by their personal competition and more by strategic ideas that dominated the royal minds: these wars were 'not simply the outcome of royal personality traits and the pursuit of kingly honour' (p. 10). Dynastic claims, so cherished by many authors, were just a *casus belli*, so 'like a litigious landowner, Henry could invoke them as and when he saw fit' (p. 11) (as an aside, the present quotation is a fine example of the author's style, which made even the most tedious places highly readable). When we read about the diplomatic 'dance' before the war we see that although economic profits were far from a major concern of the monarchs, as Hale and Tallett have correctly argued in the aforementioned works, Henry VIII was mostly worried about victory of either side of the Habsburg-Valois struggle as well as about the perils of neutrality that could lead England to isolation and threats from both Charles and Francis. The same fears drove Francis I and Charles V into the war. The three kings were caught in a web of anticipatory attacks. Renaissance geopolitics seems to be surprisingly close to our modern understanding international balance', considered wise by some and paranoid by others. Similar 'defensive' reasoning can be applied to many other early modern wars (especially the wars of Philip II) and as usual the true cause of war seems to lie in irrational suspicions.

As you may see, most merits of this book stem from it being a thorough narrative instead of a general overview or a narrow thematic research work. In recent years we've seen too many attempts to build theories and explanations using as foundations narratives created decades ago, which is almost akin to gathering fruit from a poisonous tree.<sup>2</sup> Potter's own overview

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*Early Modern Europe, 1495-1715* (London and New York, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> A notable example is Bert S. Hall, *Weapons and Warfare in Renaissance Europe: Gunpowder, Technology and Tactics*

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<sup>1</sup> John R. Hale, *War and Society in Renaissance Europe 1450-1620* (Leicester, 1985); Frank Tallett, *War and Society in*

of the French military organisation was a superb example of a cautious approach to generalisations and the creation of a solid base for conclusions.<sup>3</sup> Now we have a monograph of a different kind, but one which is still not confined to narrow issues and is extremely thought-provoking: a mark of a true historian's work. There is a lot more to learn from this book about early modern state, society and warfare, than one would imagine from its title.

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(Baltimore & London, 1997). As Geoffrey Parker notes in his review, Hall's account of the role of firearms in Italian Wars 'scarcely moves beyond the vintage studies of Delbrück (1920), Taylor (1921), and Oman (1937)'. See Geoffrey Parker, 'Weapons and Warfare in Renaissance Europe. Gunpowder, Technology and Tactics by Bert S. Hall', *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 114, No. 455 (Feb., 1999), p. 169. Thomas Arnold calls Oman 'the best general introduction to the armies and campaigns of the Renaissance period', while Robert Knecht also employs Oman for description of battles. See Thomas Arnold, *Renaissance at War* (London, 2001), p. 218; and Robert J. Knecht, *The Rise and Fall of Renaissance France, 1483-1610* (London, 1996).

One of the most recent examples from the popular history genre, Henrik Lunde, *A Warrior Dynasty: The Rise and Fall of Sweden as a Military Superpower, 1611-1721* (Havertown, PA, 2014) heavily relies on a number of outdated studies, including Delbrück.

<sup>3</sup> David Potter, *Renaissance France at War: Armies, Culture and Society, c. 1480-1560* (Woodbridge, Eng., & Rochester, NY, 2008).