Students of War: Books and the Education of the American Continental Army
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General George Washington, the commander-in-chief of the American Continental Army, may not have had an advanced education according to the customs of his day but he placed great value on the benefits that Continental Army officers could gain from a broad-based study of military texts. In a large degree due to his influence and exhortations, military books supplemented the hard lessons learned on the battlefield and shaped the development of many Continental Army officers. Studying classical military history and many other categories of military texts was not a unique practice of the American Patriots, but had been adopted from the example of British Army officers who had long relied on military treatises to prepare officers for their roles in the army and continue their education.

While they initially undertook their military studies before acquaintance with Washington, self-taught men like Henry Knox and Nathanael Greene who had no previous military experience became competent commanders in part due to their studies of military texts. Knox and Greene rapidly gained Washington’s respect and became two of his most capable and trusted subordinates; they exemplified the value of military study to supplement innate leadership skills. Washington was known to exhort his officers to put aside gaming and instead devote their free time to study. He noted in his General Orders of 8 May 1777 that nothing “would redound more to their honor...than to devote the vacant moments...to the study of Military authors.”

After the outbreak of war with the French and their Native American allies in 1754, Washington, who had led Virginia’s provin-
cial troops in the earliest stages of the French and Indian War, began to supplement his practical experience with military studies. As early as 1755, he ordered *A Treatise of Military Discipline* by Humphrey Bland. Washington was influenced by the British officers whom he admired and sought to emulate; he adopted their practice of reading military texts. He had likely learned of Bland’s book from British Commander-in-Chief Major General Edward Braddock. Washington had joined Braddock’s army without pay, serving in a junior capacity in the hope that he could win a British officer’s commission. He served as Braddock’s aide-de-camp during the ill-fated British campaign to the Monongahela in 1754, which resulted in Braddock’s death. Washington’s military education advanced rapidly in the fires of war, but he also benefitted from the reading recommendations of more senior officers. For instance, in 1756, Colonel William Fairfax, one of Washington’s earliest mentors, wrote to Washington, “I am sensible that such a medley of undisciplined militia must create you various troubles, but, having Caesar's Commentaries, and perhaps Quintus Curtius, you have therein read of greater fatigues.”

Washington was not alone in adopting the study of military literature from the example of the British Army officers. For those in the Continental Army of the American War for Independence, studying military histories and technical treatises supplemented the meager experience they had relative to their foes in the British Army. Recent scholarship has shed new light on the role that military studies played to educate British, American, and French Army officers prior to and during the War of American Independence, using books now in the possession of the Anderson House Library of the Society of the Cincinnati in Washington, D.C. The Society of the Cincinnati, founded by officers of the Continental Army, is the oldest patriotic organization in America. Its holdings include an exten-
sive rare book collection from the American Revolutionary War period.\textsuperscript{5}

Across Europe, the growth of military professionalism, which had begun in the sixteenth century, established the need for better-trained officers who could lead troops and effectively use the improved military technology that resulted from the introduction of gunpowder and “portable firearms.”\textsuperscript{6} Infantry tactics underwent significant change and infantry formations evolved from “lumbering dinosaurs ... massive squares of infantry made up of central blocks of pikemen fronted on all four sides by deep belts of musketeers,” to infantry formations that deployed men in “shallower, linear formations” which allowed much more efficient use of the musket.\textsuperscript{7}

The evolution of European armies did not occur in a vacuum. It evolved from the political, social, religious and technical change buffeting Europe, as the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment periods destabilized the previous medieval order of Western Europe. European governments evolved, in general becoming more centralized, autocratic and bureaucratic as they developed the administrative structures to fund and manage the state and the state-supported army. England was a bit of an anomaly, but its constitutional monarchy likewise developed an administrative structure to fund its military and to supply both the soldiers to staff it and the officers to lead it.\textsuperscript{8}

England’s journey toward military professionalism took a leap forward in the late sixteenth century as England re-engaged in the wars of mainland Europe. As early as 1572, Queen Elizabeth I (r. 1558-1603) sent military support to the Dutch Republic to aid that country in its struggles to be independent of Spain. Despite experience in England’s internal wars, the English soldiers “found the new style of warfare in mainland Europe chaotic and bewildering.”\textsuperscript{9} Historian Roger B. Manning notes that the reintroduction of English
officers to mainland European warfare allowed English officers to observe and gain experience in “new styles of command and standards of professionalism” as well as with the military tactics used by the Dutch. Manning further notes that the Dutch innovations required much more of army officers; they were now responsible for “managing and training soldiers on a daily basis.” The new demands placed on officers encouraged them to address and improve their own skills. In this period prior to the existence of formal military academies, officers frequently turned to books to enhance their knowledge, for an “aristocratic military officer was expected to be well read and educated” and “[r]eadng military treatises and memoirs was recommended as the best way to supplement the actual experience of battle.”

During the seventeenth century, English standing armies came into being, tied to the outbreak of the religious and dynastic civil wars that culminated in the rise of Oliver Cromwell and the New Model Army. The English Restoration period, which followed Cromwell’s fall, not only restored the monarchy to England but it also reinforced the need to keep a tight rein on the army. It strengthened the English practice to limit the officer ranks to the aristocracy, a method thought to ensure the army’s allegiance to the Crown and to the aristocratic order after the horrors of Cromwellian civil war. The restored monarch, Charles II (r. 1660-1685) had limited options and financial means available to build an effective army. Thus, constrained by fears that a standing army supported despotic rule as well as limited by the financial wherewithal to support an army, the embryonic English professional army withered to a shell of its former self. Religious strife continued to plague England. With Charles’ death, the crown passed to his brother, the more openly Catholic James II. James’ Protestant subjects were frightened by the birth of a Stuart male heir in 1688 and soon “a group of Eng-
lish Protestants begged the Dutch Stadholder, William of Orange … married to James II’s eldest daughter, Mary … to come to their aid.” By 1688, unable to withstand the invasion of William of Orange, the last Stuart king, James II fled the kingdom of England and the reign of his son-in-law began.

The concept of a military revolution in early modern Europe has been the subject of historical debate for half a century or more, beginning with theories espoused by historian Michael Roberts, who focused on the period spanning 1560 to 1660. Roberts’s lecture, “The Military Revolution, 1560-1660,” given at Queens University of Belfast in 1955, was critiqued by historian Geoffrey Parker in 1974 through an article titled “The ‘Military Revolution,’ 1560-1660—A Myth?” Parker challenged Roberts’s assertions of a military revolution during the period in question as he analyzed earlier modes of warfare, particularly those of the Spanish and Italian armies, which preceded the innovations claimed by Roberts in areas of tactics, strategy, size of armies, and military theory. Historian Jeremy Black carried the argument forward in the twenty-first century. His article “Was there a Military Revolution in Early Modern Europe?” written in 2008, argued that Parker’s assertions had limited applicability outside of Western Europe.

Despite the on-going historiographical debate about the revolutionary nature of changes in early modern warfare and the origins of many of its defining elements, there is general agreement that the complexities of early modern warfare dictated the need for military books to provide insight and instruction to military officers of the period. Parker notes the emergence of illustrated military training manuals in 1607 with the release of “Jacob de Gheyn’s Wapenbandelinghe van roers, musquetten ende spies-sen [Arms drill with arquebus, musket and pike]” which was published in Amsterdam and created under the supervision of Count John II of Nassau. Parker further
notes that this book was almost immediately “pirated and plagiarized;” and that it “rapidly [went] through numerous editions in Dutch, French, German, English, even Danish.” What were essentially military “textbooks” came into vogue early in the seventeenth century, enabling junior officers to train and drill their troops. Classical military treatises played a role in the advancement of military knowledge and techniques in the early modern period. Historian David Parrott notes that Dutch military reformers “stated explicitly that the basis of their tactical and organizational changes was a re-newed study of the military prescriptions of classical authors—above all, Flavius Vegetius Renatus, Claudius Aelian and the Byzantine Emperor Leo VI.” Additionally, changes in the nature of fortifications and siege warfare, in response to improvements in artillery, brought about a new emphasis on learning mathematics, in particular for gaining “knowledge of trigonometry and logarithms” to construct the “trace italienne, a circuit of low, thick walls punctuated by quadrilateral bastions” which provided much better protection against bombardment. Soon technical treatises followed—works on “artillery and fortification by French soldier-authors Vauban, Pagan, Belidor, and Clairac.” Perhaps the most famous of these authors was Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban (1633-1707), of whom it has been said that he “established a nearly-infallible routine which was accessible to ordinary mortals who were willing to take the trouble to become versed in it.” A fortress built according to Vauban’s specifications would withstand attack while a fortress besieged according to Vauban’s methods was sure to fall.

King Louis XIV (r. 1643-1715) has been credited with guiding France to become “[t]he leading military power and model for most of late seventeenth-century Europe.” In doing so, France and Louis XIV profited from the ministries of Jean Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683) and of Michel Le Tellier (1603-1685) and his son, François
Michel Le Tellier (1641-1691). These men were instrumental in driving improvement to France’s administrative and fiscal structure to better support France’s military efforts. French administrative reforms “reduced the abuses and wastage which had undermined earlier French military efforts.”\textsuperscript{23} The war-like Louis XIV enlarged his dominions substantially and by the end of the French conflict with the Dutch through 1672-1679, had “made the largest territorial gains of the last 250 years of the French monarchy.”\textsuperscript{24} France’s bold military expansionism, its absolute monarchy and its adherence to the hierarchical Roman Catholic faith set it at odds with the closely allied Protestant kingdom of England (Great Britain following the 1707 Act of Union) and the Dutch republic. Manning claims that the selection of William and Mary to rule England set in motion a period of warfare between Britain and France that lasted until the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars of the early nineteenth century. The wars between Britain and France came to encompass much of Europe as well as colonial North America, embroiling the colonists of both countries in a protracted struggle for control of America.\textsuperscript{25}

Colonial America’s experience with war differed remarkably from that of Britain and France. The European colonization of the New World created a collision of alien peoples. The European colonists and the indigenous peoples they encountered created an extraordinarily combustible mixture. The colonists saw the Native Americans as a truly alien race; that perception significantly affected how they waged war with the natives. English colonists brought their institutions, world-view, and prejudice with them as they crossed the Atlantic. One of their transplanted institutions was the English militia system. Their imported world-view included a deeply held Protestant faith and an abject hatred for their European rivals, the French “papists.” In his analysis of the early “American Way of
War,” historian Don Higginbotham outlined the state of the military historiography of colonial America and noted that the colonists adapted a type of total war in the colonies as they sought to annihilate their adversaries. While their European counterparts reacted with horror to the bloody Thirty Years’ War and adopted a “more restrained” approach to warfare, the colonists felt that their very existence was at stake in the conflicts in the New World and fought with “a zeal for destroying their enemies.”

Interestingly, Higginbotham postulates that there were various levels of the colonial way of war. He states that the colonists were most brutal to their Indian adversaries, more “restrained” toward their typical enemies, the French and Spanish, and most civilized toward their British cousins in the American War of Independence.

How war was conducted during the American War of Independence was thus influenced not only by military trends developed over the preceding centuries in Europe but also by colonial Americans’ experience gained in New World conflicts. Historians have debated whether the American Revolution was a radical rebellion or a conservative response to Britain’s attempt to wrest increased revenue from the mainland colonies. Regardless of the political nature of the rebellion, the choice of George Washington as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, established the conservative Washington in command, rather than his chief rival, the radical Charles Lee. Had the Continental Congress elected to elevate Lee to top command, it is highly likely that the nature of war in the colonies would have been much different, as Lee espoused a reliance on irregular warfare, rather than the more conventional forms of warfare adopted by Washington.

While the rebels’ colonial militia was to play a large role throughout the American War for Independence, Washington favored the development of a European-styled army. Through his earlier experience in the French and Indian War, Wash-
ington developed an appreciation for the British practice of military study. As noted by historian Ira D. Gruber, “[b]ooks were essential to the eighteenth-century British army and its officer corps … officers turned to … books to expand their knowledge of wars and warfare … to keep abreast of developments in the art of war [and] to share specialized knowledge.”

Gruber traces Britain’s path to the development of a professional officer corps and standing army, noting the unique position of the British Isles to insulate England – and later Britain – from many of the military developments on the continent until, as earlier noted, England’s involvement in the Dutch wars. Gruber states that the English Glorious Revolution, which brought William and Mary to the throne, was the turning point for England. With their ascension, the new monarchs and Parliament adopted measures to “impose taxes … raise standing armies … [and] create a permanent and responsible bureaucracy to manage those forces … ensuring that soldiers were subordinate to the king in Parliament.” In part due to these developments, the British officer corps continued to advance in its professional progress, supported by on-the-job experience, a wide array of military reading material, and the establishment of the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich during the middle of the eighteenth century. The British academy at Woolwich specialized in training artillery and engineering officers who received an extensive education, primarily in various fields of mathematics. France created several military academies by the middle of the eighteenth century (the *Ecole militaire* in 1751, the artillery academy at La Fère in 1758, and several specialty schools which taught engineering) as did other European military powers, including Poland (the Polish Knights’ School) and Austria (the *Theresianum*).

Gruber’s study of the military reading habits of forty-two senior British officers determined their preference for books devoted to
“military and naval history, engineering, the art of war, and the classics” rather than books on “drill, discipline, and medicine” by the middle of the eighteenth century. Gruber also noted that the British officers exhibited a strong preference for books written on the continent, especially those from France. Similarly, a recent study on the reading habits of American and French officers during the American Revolutionary War by Sandra L. Powers, the Library Director Emerita of the Society of the Cincinnati in Washington, D.C., noted strong similarities between the books read by British officers and by French officers of the same period.

Washington and his fledgling Continental Army were able to draw on a supply of well-developed military literature to supplement their limited military experience. While the privileged senior officers studied by Gruber shunned drill manuals, these books were necessary for the education and development of the Continental Army. Washington emphasized the use of military drill manuals to American officers. In a letter to Colonel William Woodford dated November 10, 1775, Washington counseled Woodford to study drill manuals:

As to the manual exercise, the evolutions and manoeuvres (sic) of a regiment, with other knowledge necessary to the soldier, you will acquire them from those authors, who have treated upon these subjects, among whom Bland (the newest edition) stands foremost; also an Essay on the Art of War; Instructions for Officers, lately published at Philadelphia; the Partisan; Young; and others.

In an early twentieth century analysis of George Washington’s military studies, Oliver L. Spaulding, Jr. commented that the Bland military handbook was one of the most popular of its type in Britain during the mid-eighteenth century. Spaulding’s personal review of the version that Washington had acquired found the Bland treatise
to be “a most excellent statement of the art of war as known and practiced by Marlborough and his contemporaries, and as then practiced in the British army.” Washington, it seems, had been recommending Bland’s treatise to others as early as 1756. However, the relative inexperience of the colonial militia and the soldiers of the Continental Army shaped the need for a simpler drill manual than Bland’s. That manual dictated that soldiers follow “sixteen orders [and use] forty-nine motions to load their weapons.” Early in the war, an American, Captain Timothy Pickering, wrote Easy Plan of Discipline for a Militia, which streamlined the process. Historian Don Higginbotham noted that Pickering’s Easy Plan reduced the number of movements to load a musket from forty-nine to ten and the officers’ commands from sixteen orders to one. In addition, Pickering encouraged soldiers to aim their weapons — not a practice normally emphasized in the British ranks, which relied on a short-range discharge of massed musket fire for deadly effectiveness.

The Continental Army also benefitted from a number of European “imports,” notably Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, who became known as the “Drillmaster” of the American Revolution. Steuben’s efforts were essential to develop the professionalism of the Continental Army, its officers and soldiers. Before Steuben’s arrival, American officers had used whichever drill method they had learned, be it Prussian, French, or British. Steuben, working with the Continental Army at its winter quarters in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania during the winter of 1778, instilled a consistency of drill and maneuver for the army, enshrined in his Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States, published in 1779. Historian Paul Lockhart notes that in the campaigns that followed Valley Forge, the “Continental Army demonstrated again and again that its metamorphosis at Valley Forge was no temporary phenomenon.” Steuben’s students had learned their lessons well.
Technical books on artillery, fortification and siege warfare were important sources of military education during the eighteenth century. In addition to reading books, however, Washington benefitted from the expertise of several foreign military engineers, including Polish Colonel Thaddeus Kosciuszko who served the American cause throughout the war. Powers notes in her study of military books known to American officers that there was physical evidence of Americans’ engineering studies. British officer Lachlan Campbell noted in his diary:

The face of the country can only be compared to one of the demonstrative Plates of Treatises on Fortification when a number of plans are inscr[ed] in an accidental Irregularity calculated only to make the most of the space. . . . The General designs of their works are Erected from Mons. Clairae’s Elements de Fortification.42

While Kosciuszko has received acclaim from historians for his contributions to the American cause, in at least one instance he neglected to follow the structures of military science then in fashion and failed in his attempt to take an enemy fort. Kosciuszko, as an engineering advisor, accompanied Continental Army Major General Nathanael Greene to lay siege to the British outpost of Ninety Six, South Carolina in April 1781. Without following the formulaic approach to begin siege parallels at a significant distance from the targeted fortification, Kosciuszko and Greene instructed their men to dig their initial trenches within seventy feet of the fort. Their opponents, the British and Loyalist forces at Ninety Six were more conscientious in their preparations. Lieutenant Henry Haldane, a military engineer sent by Cornwallis to the post, designed one of the redoubts as a star fort, an eight-pointed design that allowed defenders to fire musket and cannon in all directions, following a seven-
teenth century innovation of Vauban’s. Cannon fire from the fort decimated the American sappers. “Their lesson quickly learned, the Americans began their next round of parallel siege trenches at a more respectful distance [400 yards].”

Kosciuszko’s lapse at Ninety Six was a minor mistake, however, and had no bearing on the outcome of the war. A much more famous siege occurred several months later at Yorktown, Virginia. Here the Americans and their French allies executed a classic eighteenth century siege, the result of which spelled the end of Britain’s lengthy war to retain its mainland American colonies.

Despite a lack of formal military training available to his officers, Washington succeeded in creating an environment that encouraged learning. However, Americans did not simply adopt European methods, but integrated them into the Continental Army and American militias in such a way that reflected the strengths and weaknesses of American colonial culture. For instance, Steuben observed, “the genius of this nation is not in the least to be compared with that of the Prussians, Austrians, or French. You say to your soldier, ‘Do this,’ and he doeth it, but I am obliged to say, “This is the reason why you ought to do that,’ and he does it.” Steuben realized that he needed to adjust his training methods to reach his American students; by doing so, his pupils at Valley Forge repaid his efforts and responded to his modified techniques. After Valley Forge, the Continental Army displayed its new-found capabilities at the Battle of Monmouth Courthouse, noted by Shy as a “soldiers’ victory.” Following Steuben’s training, the rank and file of the Continental Army were able to take the field and perform admirably in the face of the professional British forces. From military drill manuals that simplified and standardized military roles and maneuvers to training exercises which had been adapted to their needs, the American Continental Army learned to effectively fight and together with their
French allies, win America’s independence.

Notes


8 Ibid.


10 Ibid., 674.

11 Ibid., 675.

12 Ibid.


16 Ibid., 202.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 25.


22 Ostwald, Vauban’s Siege Legacy, 16.


27 Ibid., 234.


29 Shy, A People Numerous & Armed, 138-140, 147.


Bibliography


