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**The Early Modern Western World (c.1450-
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Title: **To what extent was the Thirty Years' War a turning point in the history of warfare?**

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Since historian Michael Roberts coined the term ‘military revolution’ of the early modern era and referred it to the time period of 1560-1660, many altering views have been presented with regards to the relevance of this statement. Some take the stand that a military *revolution* never took place, whilst others argue that it did so before and after Roberts’s suggested time frame.¹ Still, the Thirty Years’ War, 1618-1648, was a major conflict being fought during Roberts’s ‘revolutionary time’, and in searching for the source for the military advancements in early modern Europe, one should therefore indeed evaluate the importance of this conflict. The aim of this essay, thus, is to explore to what extent the Thirty Years’ War was a turning point in the history of warfare. This will be done by examining the impacts and originality of tactical improvements made by, primarily, Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden as well as analyzing the subsequent administrative developments of the military organization as a whole. Lastly, by addressing how these aspects in turn shaped the European military expansion in the non-Western world, a conclusion will be reached that whilst the Thirty Years’ War might not have had a lasting impact on many tactical tendencies to come, it did in several ways act as a steppingstone for the formation of the modern world order with military state power in focus.

In the tactical revolution of early modern warfare, greater changes came from the constant efforts to improve military technology. Some of the most commonly mentioned inventions which distinguished the early conflicts of the modern era from those of the medieval times are more complex gunpowder weaponry, a broader and more powerful naval capacity, and improved fortifications, with the most famous one being the star-like ‘*trace italienne*’.²

Although heavily used during the Thirty Years’ War, none of these characterizing

¹ Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution, Military innovation and the rise of the West 1500-1800*, (Cambridge, 1996) p.158

² Thomas F. Arnold, ‘War in Sixteenth Century Europe: Revolution and Renaissance’ in ed. Jeremy Black (ed.) *European Warfare, 1453-1815*, (Basingstoke, 1999) pp. 25-27

developments sprung from the years of 1618-1648. Focusing on these three advancements, a military revolution rather took place during the 16th century instead, which saw the mounting improvement of them all.³ Additionally, looking beyond the 30 Years' War, the weaponry revolution responsible for the 18th century's military strength, such as the replacement of the pike with the bayonet, was not initiated until decades later.⁴

Nevertheless, the Thirty Years War still saw some concentrated launches of new military tactics not to be overlooked, although their originality and lasting influence can be debated. When discussing tactical advancements in conflicts of the early 17th century, King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden is regularly referred to as the driving force behind re-evaluations of old tactics and the emergence of new ones. He is famously known for having rearranged his infantry formations to more shallow lines and for having discarded the use of cavalry as merely supportive units. Instead, with the wish to move from traditional defensive tactics to stronger offense, he reintroduced direct cavalry attacks with swords, and also developed new methods for his firing lines of musketeers to move forward whilst reloading instead of staying still, as procedure stated in the common school.⁵ These changes have indeed been viewed as innovative for its time, but when on the topic of the revolutionary aspect of the Thirty Years' War, it is important to recognize how Gustavus Adolphus's tactics in fact were a borrowed mixture of already existing ones. He was, for example, heavily influenced by the infantry developments made by Count Maurice of Nassau in the 16th Century Netherlands.⁶

Further, the Swedish King's 'revolutionary' tactics were mostly shaped around the open field battles of the Thirty Years' War, which were not representative of the general battle development throughout Europe at that time. Due to the increasing numbers of cities being

³ Parker, *The Military Revolution*, p.159

⁴ Jeremy Black, *A Military Revolution? Military change and European society 1550-1800* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, London, 1991) pp. 28-34

⁵ Black, *A Military Revolution?* pp. 3-10

⁶ Black, *A Military Revolution?*, pp. 2-3

protected by the new '*trace italienne*', siege warfare began to outgrow traditional battles, and became the most common form of combat during the early modern period.⁷ With this, the importance of artillery mounted, and Gustavus Adolphus is here, again, known for having inspired a production of lighter field artillery to increase mobility in combat.⁸ Although this is indeed true, one must avoid overestimating the connection between artillery development during the Thirty Years' War and its later use in mobile modern battles; for the lack of required horsepower and portable supplies in the early 17th century simply could not provide for canons as flexible in battle as the Swedish king desired.⁹ Gustavus's field tactics, although inspiring several other armies in his time, could thus be considered to lack influence in long-lasting revolutionary change. The developments made during the 30 Years' War may show many similarities to the general advancement of early modern warfare to come, but nonetheless they should arguably be regarded as steppingstones in the process of a greater change, rather than the inventions which made modern warfare possible. Especially is this so, as the Thirty Years' War on the whole, in fact was a period distinguished not by major scale tactical transformations, but by relatively homogeneous warfare and indecisive battles.¹⁰ This makes it even harder to argue for its dominance among sources of early modern military development when referring to the question of tactics.

Despite the lack of lasting tactical improvements, the reforms of the 30 Years' War can, to a greater extent, be connected to the advancements in the modern military administration.

Advocates of the early 17th century as a period for military revolution often point to the contemporary rise in army sizes and suggest it to be a product of King Gustavus's tactical developments. Looking at military records, however, this can be established as a flawed

⁷ Parker, *The Military Revolution*, p. 155

⁸ David A. Parrott, Strategy and Tactics in the Thirty Years' War: The "Military Revolution", *Militaergeschichtliche Zeitschrift*, 38:2 (1985) pp.7-26

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Black, *A Military Revolution?*, pp. 10-13

proposition; the initial increase of soldiers predated the Thirty Years' War and can be traced back to the emergence of infantry over cavalry and the new demand for men for siege battles of 'trace italiennes' (c. 1500).¹¹ Nevertheless, one must not in haste devalue the re-arrangements made in these growing armies during the 30 Year's War, as they, arguably, succeeded in transforming the military organization in lasting ways. With a focus on narrower battle formations and improved fire-discipline, troops now needed to undergo better training in technique and discipline than required before.¹² This training costed both time and money, and so it became unprofitable to demobilize after each campaign, and the idea of the modern standing army was cemented.¹³ Further, with his army sizes on the rise, Gustavus Adolphus is said to have pioneered the strategy of moving several armies into separate combats simultaneously, which is something that since has been seen to occur in most conflicts of modern time.¹⁴

Growing armies inevitably also caused the transformation from individual wars to state wars, and the Thirty Years' War saw the early formations of what is today known as 'total war'.¹⁵ As a result of this, wars additionally evolved to be more interconnected with each other, which Gustavus Adolphus carefully noted in a letter from 1628.¹⁶ Such an expansion in the scale of military campaigns initially posed several difficulties for the states to tackle, among which capital played a central role.¹⁷ The lack of supplies became apparent already during the 16th century as armies grew, but it took until the Thirty Years' War for a worthy solution to be found by the Dutch. They tried the approach of basing their war economy on loans which

¹¹ Geoffrey Parker, *Spain and the Netherlands 1559-1659; ten studies (The Military Revolution, 1560-1660 – A Myth?)*, (London, 1990) pp. 95-97

¹² Michel Roberts, 'The Military Revolution, 1560-1660' in Clifford J. Rogers (ed.) *The military revolution debate: readings on the transformation of early modern Europe* (Colorado, Oxford, 1995) p. 14

¹³ Parker, *Military Revolution*, p.97

¹⁴ Roberts, *The Military Revolution*, p.19

¹⁵ Roberts, *The Military Revolution*, p.8

¹⁶ Axel Oxenstierna, *Rikskanslern Axel Oxenstiernas skrifter och brefvexling* (Stockholm, 1888) p.396

¹⁷ Roberts, *The Military Revolution*, p. 27

proved very effective, as it allowed them to “raise an army and go on fighting, whatever the cost, until they got their way”.¹⁸ Soon, many other states followed, and another immense wave of army growth could unfold before the first decade of the 18th century.¹⁹

A great deal of administration behind this evolving war machine was needed, and the increasing numbers of soldiers to control led to a rise of state authority. As Michael Roberts puts it, the 17th century saw the days of feud disappear forever and the state, very much in their own interest, received a military monopoly, as they were the only institution with capacity to supply the “administrative, technical and financial resources required for large-scale hostilities.”²⁰ However, an administrative transformation with regards to military forces was still nothing new for the 17th century. As noted above, an initial growth in army sizes took place already in the late 16th century and thus coincided, most likely not out of coincidence, with the general bureaucratic reform of society, originating from the rearrangements of the Renaissance state.²¹ Yet, the Thirty Years’ War brought new recruitment methods which weakened the social hierarchy of the army and made it a career available to the masses; a development most necessary for the greater inter-state wars to come.

With all this in mind, it is arguably not an overstatement to suggest, as many historians hitherto have, that the modern army was created in symbiosis with the modern state and international relations. This becomes even more apparent when looking beyond the European evolution of war, to the armed conflicts played out in the accelerating expansion of the West into the ‘new world’. The impact of the Thirty Years’ War on these non-European campaigns can be questioned, as the warship production, often mentioned as a critical innovation for the

¹⁸ Parker, *Spain and the Netherlands*, p. 102

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Roberts, *The Military Revolution*, p. 20

²¹ Parker, *Military Revolution*, pp. 88-98

European domination of global battles originated from the 16th century.²² Further, the knowledge of siege warfare and artillery fortresses is said to have given the Europeans a significant advantage in their expansions which, again, are tactics and innovations springing from the days before the Thirty Years' War.²³ Still, one could argue that the intense use of these innovations during the Thirty Years' War led to greater knowledge of their applications, which would have enhanced the European chances of successful expansions. Additionally, the administrative reform of the 17th century further came to aid European conquests overseas, as acquired native troops were trained in the new effective fashion, with focus on morale, discipline, and officers to lead the way.²⁴ These were all aspects enhanced by the transformations of war organization during the Thirty Years' War, and therefore it could very well be said to have accelerated the military expansion which characterizes the growing tensions of modern times.²⁵

To what extent can it then be argued that the Thirty Years' War was a turning point in the history of warfare? With regards to tactical improvements, its revolutionary influence is rather weak. Most innovations shaping the battles originated from earlier days than the 17th century, and the re-arrangements of Gustavus Adolphus failed to reflect the dominance of siege warfare at the time. Nevertheless, the 1618-1648 states' approach to the steadily growing army sizes ascending from tactical transformations can, still, be argued to have laid ground for the formation of a new, modernized military force. The war administration advanced and the demobilization of armies was heavily reduced. The state, thus, gained greater control over the armed forces, and military enlistment became an option for every common man in order to match the soldier demand. This new art of war did not only change

²² Arnold, 'War in sixteenth century Europe', pp.26-27

²³ Parker, *Military Revolution*, pp. 121-156

²⁴ *Ibid*

²⁵ Black, *A Military Revolution?*, p. 17

the battlefields of Europe but also enhanced the success of expansion in non-European territories, causing international tensions to grow. A more militarized world order had been born, and at its heart lay the shift of military power to the states as a result of rising armies and tactical developments. It is excessive to propose that such advancements from the Thirty Years' War alone revolutionized the techniques and politics of war so that the stage for future modern conflicts was created. It can, however, be argued that they accelerated an already ongoing transformation of early modern warfare, to generate an increasingly global outlook on war where military power plays a central role in international relations.

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