



*War, Power and the Enlightenment*¹

by Jeremy Black

Emeritus Professor, University of Exeter

(jeremy.martin.black@gmail.com)

Abstract

This article reconsiders the relationship between Enlightenment thought, international relations, and warfare in the eighteenth century. It argues that historians have often emphasized ideals and discourse while overlooking the practical realities of conflict and state power. Rather than producing a more humane form of warfare, Enlightenment-era rationalization frequently enhanced military efficiency through advances in administration, science, and organization. The article highlights the tension between ideals and practice, suggesting that the enduring legacy of the Enlightenment lay less in universal humanitarian principles than in new capacities to mobilize resources, manage information, and project power on a global scale.

This piece focuses on a significant theme, namely the relation between the ideals embodied in the concept «the Enlightenment» and the developing realities of war in the eighteenth century. Furthermore, the relationships between such matters then and today are important and valid. Yet, focused on what are presented as texts and discourse, the discussion of the Enlightenment, however delimited, tends to be presented as an episode of intellectual history. Indeed, I once angered J.G.A. Pocock at a seminar by contrasting his approach to what I termed my interest in the

¹ I am most grateful to Thomas Otte for his comments on an earlier draft.

“nuts and bolts” of what actually happened or, considered differently, an ongoing interest in practice rather than theory as content, goal and significance. Possibly unfair, and metaphors anyway can be slippery.

Nevertheless, what the Enlightenment meant in terms of international relations and warfare, a topic the practicality of which did not greatly engage Pocock, was, in fact, of particular importance. This was because conflict, or the possibility of conflict, affected all in an age in which conscription was widespread. Furthermore, the practice of warfare continued to be highly brutal, and notably toward civilians who were poor, which was the great majority.

The impressions about the period offered to the contrary by some commentators and scholars are misleading, although, however minor, incremental change in the sense of amelioration could be useful. As a consequence, the impact of abstract ideals, by whatever name those ideals might be called, for example on the desirability of the avoidance of war, was problematic.

In addition, it is worth seeking geographical variations in the horror of conflict and asking whether differences in restraint, for example in the commonplace treatment of prisoners, civilians and, indeed, ordinary soldiers/seamen in one’s own army did not in practice reflect cultural norms. The latter of course can be regarded as longstanding and as not essentially dating from this period. Conversely, whatever is understood as Enlightenment, can be treated as significant in maintaining or re-representing existing norms. The Enlightenment from that perspective can be seen as a variation on Christian thought: each of course was very varied in context, content and application, and each of consequence, although Christian thought had a far greater resonance, in part because the Church gave it a universal character in Christian Europe.

This situation invites attention as to the future, not least as there is a degree of comparison between the situation in the eighteenth century and that today when liberal interventionism, humanitarianism, international law and a “rules-based order”, can all be presented as «enlightened»; while the self-interest of power-based «Realism» can be decried as the opposite. All comparisons are open to criticism and contextualisation, but there is certainly, in Enlightenment studies, the classic rift of international relations theory between «Idealism» and «Realism». Possibly that rift could be more explicitly brought into the discussion of Enlightenment as doctrine, theory and idea; but the focus here is on practice in the «Age of En-

lightenment». That focus might encourage a rift between «Idealism», and «Possibilism», with the latter a key constraint on all idealistic notions and certainly so in terms of sustained and successful application.

Practice and «possibilism» do not necessarily mean any particular praise for the trend of development. Practice indeed invites consideration of whereas and whys, not least in so far as there might be contrasts between what was done with codes of behaviour. However, a characteristic of the period, as of others, was that such codes were generally, at least to a degree, in abeyance. Thus, as an instance of such a contrast, most individuals in the eighteenth century proclaimed their loyalty but, nevertheless, evaded taxation and were even ready to rebel if they deemed necessary.

Instead, a functionalism was to the fore and that is probably the best way to look at the Enlightenment however construed, namely as a period or theme or doctrine in terms of functionalism. Thus, idealists in the period sought to have their ideas applied. This functional approach has been narrowed down by historical rationalisation in terms of Enlightened Despotism. Yet, much associated with that could already be seen with the mercantilist policies and governmental changes pursued in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in the so-called Age of Absolutism.

And that earlier period is not generally seen in terms of Enlightenment. Indeed, the understandable concern with labels in the cause of the Enlightenment takes on even greater weight if other period labels are similarly reassessed. There is in practice no precision to match the Periodic Table beloved of chemists. Instead, there are caveats, overlaps, and structural issues that preside across time. And these points were ones that also challenge the attempts by some «Enlightened» commentators, for example William Robertson, and Adam Smith, to see history in stadial terms, with these terms being those of development.

The need by governments in the eighteenth century that was most acute was that of security, and this need encouraged a functionalism that emphasised the «despotism» side of «Enlightened Despotism». Thus, Gustavus III of Sweden wrote in 1781 that changes in warfare toward larger forces had ensured that republics could not compete, an argument he underlined with the case of the Dutch Republic; and he added that the drive for liberty entailed the risk of losing independence, respect and glory. In turn, George III remarked of Gustavus in 1787: «I never will ac-

knowledge that the king of a limited monarchy can on any principle endeavour to change the constitution and increase his own power. No honest man will attempt it»².

Gustavus III, a monarch usually discussed in terms of the Enlightenment, may not in fact be thus described accurately. Conversely, George III can appear as Enlightened, although in this case the emphasis, instead, can be on him as moderate and/or George as conservative. The argument George offers is of a Burkean organic type, with constitutionalism to the fore. Looked at differently, this was an instance of amelioration as tone, theme and policy. For example, in the case of the slave trade and slavery, this meant improvement in conditions, and not abolition. For American independence, amelioration meant freedoms but not democracy. Moreover, the assumption that republics were/are more Enlightened than monarchies, or fought in a more Enlightened fashion, looks somewhat questionable from the perspectives of Native Americans and slaves.

For international relations, there was no such constitutionalism. Indeed, the idea of a “rules-based” system essentially has been discussed in terms of the Westphalian settlement of 1648, which, chronologically, was scarcely «Enlightenment». Anyway, the Westphalian settlement was honoured far more in the breach than might be gauged from some modern praise. So also with the attempts in the 1710s and 1720s to settle disputes by means of congresses and, more generally, systems, the latter very much linked to ideas of the balance of power that in part reflected the prestige and role of Newtonian mechanics. Again, it is unclear how far the emphasis should be on the Enlightenment, however defined chronologically or thematically.

At any rate, the ideas grouped as the latter could be separated between a utopianism that drew on long-established ideas, for example those of the Charles, Abbé de Saint-Pierre (1658-1743), in favour of a perpetual peace, an approach reprised by Immanuel Kant in his *Perpetual Peace. A Philosophical Sketch* (1795); and, on the other hand, a more practised and practical incrementalism. The latter has to be handled with care for it is not clear what Enlightenment might mean in terms of killing more effectively unless in terms of the application of rationality and, linked or opposed to that, the challenge of convention, whether organisational, tech-

² *Gustave III par ses lettres*, ed. by G. von Proschwitz, Norstedts/Touzot, Stockholm/Paris 1986, p. 3; Sinclair to Hawkesbury, 2 July 1787, London, British Library [hereafter BL], Add. MS 38222, f. 91.

nological, methodological or conceptual. If any and all are considered, then the key element in the period may well be the action-reaction and practice-emulation processes of response and development, rather than top-down approaches related to ideas and their diffusion.

Indeed, the latter can be treated essentially as rationalisations of the former. Yet that would be overly limiting because ideas clearly had a role. The problem possibly is that these ideas have been simplified and reified, as «Enlightened», and, in that process, separated from the range of ideas, beliefs, precepts, tags and texts that helped explain, encourage and propagate thought. Moreover, that range should be seen as oral as well as literary, and as sometimes both, as with sermons.

Looking at warfare in terms of Enlightenment or «Enlightened Despotism» (to select two realities that really overlapped), it is best to assess them in part as an aspect of the information gathering and deployment than was characteristic of the age. Thus, military mapping the production of printed regulations, the debates about doctrine, the development of military education, and the conceptualisation of strategy as a separate area of thought, were all significant.

Classification, categorisation and codification were important aspects of Enlightenment activity. A focus on mathematics encouraged a search for precision, and in a strongly self-conscious fashion. Rigour was fostered by the development of descriptive geometry, particularly by the French mathematician Gaspard Monge (1746-1818), and was linked to a Neo-classical aesthetic in which precision and clarity replaced the exuberant formlessness of insubstantial quality associated with the Rococo. The abstract value of mathematics did not solely play an intellectual part. Indeed, mathematical principles and a geometrical science of strategy were to play key roles in *Geist des Neueren Kriegssystems* [*The Spirit of the Modern System of War*] (1799), the theory of a new science of war offered by Adam von Bülow, a former Prussian officer (1757-1807). An English translation of this book was published in 1806.

Changes stemming from the linkage of Newtonian science to fortress engineering, artillery and military thought were also significant. In particular, ballistics was revolutionised in the mid-eighteenth century, notably by Benjamin Robins (1707-51) and Leonhard Euler (1707-83), who were, respectively, British and Swiss. Theoretical and empirical advances greatly increased the predictive power of ballistics, and helped turn gunnery from a craft into a science that could, and should, be formally taught.

These developments much affected the use of artillery and encouraged the growth of military education, both informal thinking and formal structured thinking. Rulers established military academies. Increased standardisation was important for artillery and notably with the French artillery, the background and basis for Napoleon's career. Such standardisation increased predictability in the use of artillery, and thus enhanced tactical regularity.

This development of ballistics and artillery was part of a more general search for pattern and rules that would be prescriptive as well as descriptive. The theorisation of war, envisaging it as a science, and not a craft, was crucial, with a science understood in terms of rules, definitions and precision. However, this process could, and repeatedly did, lead to an underestimation of the unknown and a trend to seek to control everything, which resulted in practice, in an illusion of dominance over aspects that could not be directed.

The application of reason led in a variety of directions, asking questions about practicality and challenging established methods and, more particularly, forms of prestige. This was a matter not only of fame derived from war, but also of the automatic reverence for social rank. Enlightenment tendencies were potentially subversive in that they raised important questions about professionalism and the need for it as opposed to rank. Enlightenment writers also made highly critical remarks about the value of war. This was particularly apparent with the *philosophes* in France, and was an important aspect of their mid-century criticism of Louis XV. Voltaire proved an especially sardonic critic of war as pointless and destructive, and notably of the Seven Years' War (1756-63).

Whatever the practice of war under the *ancien régime*, there was a sense in the 1790s that a new challenge demanded a new response. In such, radicalism was bifurcated. Pressure for a more rigorous warfare, indeed a contemporary form of total war, developed in response to what was seen as the ideological threat from the Revolutionary French. In August 1792, William, Lord Auckland, a senior British diplomat, pressed that war not be conducted

with the courtesies of the age [...] the French troops, however despicable they may be in point of discipline and command, are earnest in the support of the wicked and calamitous cause in which they are engaged [...]. I sincerely hope that it may be a plan rigorously observed, to disarm every place and district through which the troops may pass, to destroy the arms, to dismantle the fortresses, to demolish the cannon, powder mills etc, and all forges for arms etc, and to issue a notice that any

place or district found a second time in arms shall be subject to military execution [...] if neglected, there is reason to believe that the impression of the interference will at best be transitory³.

That this change occurred in what was widely seen as the leading monarchy in Europe underlined the shock for the remainder of Europe. So, even more, did the pace of French success.

The flavour of attitudes that were far from limited, in a society with the clear rule of law and an experience of limited government can be glimpsed from a memorandum of October 1796 by General David Dundas, a leading British general and exponent of Prussian tactical methods, outlining the intended response if the French invaded Britain, as indeed seemed a prospect,

when an enemy lands, all the difficulties of civil government and the restraint of forms cease; every thing must give way to the supplying and strengthening the army, repelling the enemy [...] the strongest and most effectual measures are necessary [...]. The great object must be constantly to harass, alarm and fire on an enemy, and to impede his progress till a sufficient force assembles to attack him [...] every inch of ground, every field may to a degree be disputed, even by inferior number [...]. The country must be driven, and every thing useful within his reach destroyed without mercy⁴.

In part, there was, in the presentation of the previous situation, a reading back that was anachronistic in its description and misleading in its criticism of the pre-Revolutionary situation, as if that was one of inconsequential and limited warfare. The reality was very different. In 1742, an officer with the Austrian army reported of the attacking Prussians and Saxons,

we all see the barbarous and inhumane effects of their visit in Moravia [now in Czech Republic], and never was the like seen or heard of, and it is really scandalous beyond all measure that first towns and villages should be strongly taxed under contribution on arrival, and on departure pillaged and burned to the ground; this one may call the cluster or rabble of piratical incendiaries and not the generous valiant behaviour of a Christian army⁵.

Western European operations were by no means free from savage fighting or atrocities. Henry St. John, a Tory MP, later Viscount Bolingbroke, complained that English conduct during the unsuccessful attack on Cadiz in 1702 during the War of Spanish Succession, which, in Spain, was in part

³ Auckland to Morton Eden, 10, 31 Aug. 1792, BL, Add. MS 24444, ff. 55, 169, 179.

⁴ BL, Add. MS 59280, ff. 189-190.

⁵ BL, Add. MS 23810, f. 368.

a civil war, had jeopardised their chances of winning support in Spain, «Huns, Goths or vandals never proved themselves such barbarians as we have done. Neither saint, nun, church, or convent were spared»⁶. A British commentator wrote of the unsuccessful French forces in Germany in 1743, «We hear of sacrileges, murders, rapes, and all the acts of people exasperated by despair»⁷. Four years later, after the French stormed the great Dutch fortress of Bergen-op-Zoom, they gave the town over to massacre, rape and pillage. The looting of the French port of Cherbourg by drunken British troops in 1758 did little for their reputation. That people fled from war zones, as from the Rhineland in 1761, scarcely suggestive of any confidence in the limited nature of warfare, and indeed the routine short-hange of military activity could be devastating. A key instance was the bombardment of fortified towns, such as the French use of red-hot cannonballs, designed to cause fires, against Brussels in 1695. The French bombardments of Mons and Liège four years earlier were also very damaging.

To a degree, opinion in the eighteenth century deliberately represented a reaction to what was held to have characterised that of the previous century or, indeed, more generally the past. Thus, the Enlightenment, like earlier the Renaissance, was reified as a critique of past ethos and a reaction to it. This progressivist stance, however, consistently fell foul of the reality of the present. That was in part made possible due to the absence of large-scale, sustained warfare in Western Europe between 1764 and 1792. As a result, the shock of reality, as communicated for example by Voltaire in his novel *Candide*, was less present for the following generation.

Possibly reflections on the world scale should come to the fore in the conclusion, for it is difficult to think of a system able to project planned, large-scale power over the world as limited and, instead, more appropriate to regard that as a product of a culture capable of applying information and organising force in an unprecedented time-space matrix. That might have been «Enlightened» or not, but was certainly the product of Enlightenment Europe understood as the Europe of the period generally considered, or at least described, in that light. There is of course a tension expressed in the last sentence. It is a tension that should be faced and not

⁶ Reading, Berkshire CRO Trumbull MS 133/11/1.

⁷ BL, Add. MS 57308, f. 77.

Jeremy Black

elided for the sake of convenience and/or in pursuit of a *zeitgeist*, an idea as inaccurate in content as it is misleading in concept.