Between 1450 and 1650 the nature of warfare dramatically changed in Europe. At the beginning of this era, the use of gunpowder weapons became widespread throughout the continent. In response, commanders revamped their military tactics and reconstructed urban fortifications. The new weaponry also caused the size of armies to grow considerably as leaders sought to capitalize upon and defend their forces against the new weapons (Roberts 1995, 13–21; Parker 1988, 1–5). These changes caused a significant shift in the structure of European armies. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, small military forces that leaders raised occasionally from their own supporters gave way to larger armies consisting of native forces and mercenary units. Warfare during this period became entrepreneurial in nature as individual commanders constructed their own units and then sold them to the highest bidder. As a result, the loyalty of such troops to a particular cause, and the control that individual monarchs exerted over the forces fighting for them, often only extended as far as the leader’s pocketbook (Lynn 1996, 516–17). The entrepreneurial nature of warfare first took root in the wealthier regions of Europe, such as France and Spain, where rulers possessed the significant financial resources needed to maintain mercenary forces. This change spread more slowly to the European peripheries. Rulers in other regions, Scandinavia, for example, did not possess the financial resources or the political means to extract such resources from their subjects until the late sixteenth century or early seventeenth century (Lynn 1996, 508–17; Glete 2002, 177).

These military innovations, described by many historians as the military revolution, not only influenced military structures, but also caused dramatic political, social, and economic changes throughout Europe (Rogers 1995, 3–8). As the size of armies grew and the cost of hiring such forces ever increased, rulers sought to gain control over the situation. During the seventeenth century, monarchs throughout Europe engaged in a process of
state centralization that sought to bring all aspects of governing under monarchical control. One of their primary concerns was to centralize their states to better marshal their resources for warfare (Glete 2002, 1–9). As part of this process, armies increasingly took on a permanent nature with centralized administrations, standardized methods of training, and means to supply, pay, and house soldiers on a consistent basis.

Throughout this period, women played active and crucial roles in supporting the military efforts of kingdoms throughout Europe. Women from all walks of life experienced warfare, their lives shaped and changed by military affairs. Female rulers led their realms in war, noblewomen defended their holdings, civilian women endured the hardships of sieges and quartering, and officers’ wives and camp followers accompanied military forces on campaign. The contributions of these women to their countries’ war efforts were crucial because of the entrepreneurial nature of warfare during this era. Because states did not possess the administrative structures to maintain, train, house, and supply military forces on a permanent basis, troops depended upon women to provide for their domestic needs, just as they did in civil life. Women accompanied men on the march to perform a large share of the cooking, cleaning, laundering, and nursing that the troops needed. In civilian settings, women provided housing, food, and supplies to troops who were quartered among them. Around 1650, however, women’s access to military communities would begin to undergo significant changes. As rulers centralized their states and began to develop the means to supply and care for their soldiers, commanders’ needs to have women fulfill these duties disappeared (Lynn 2008, 8; Hacker 1981, 654–55, 665). Although this process would not be fully completed until the nineteenth century, growing concerns to limit and regulate women who accompanied armies during the seventeenth century represented the beginning of a process that would eventually eliminate women from the battlefield and the campaign community. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an introduction to women’s military experiences during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. It will give an overview of women’s military activities, the restrictions that shaped their involvement in various states’ war efforts, and the impact of warfare upon their lives.