The Grip of the State? Government Control over Provision of the Army in the Austrian Netherlands, 1725–1744

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In his recent book *The Business of War*, David Parrott argued in favour of according a role of importance to military entrepreneurial activities in the process of European state formation. Rather than seeing military enterprisers as a historical dead end, Parrott demonstrated that private entrepreneurs increased the reach of governments. By supplying goods and services – ranging from mercenary forces to equipping and financing state armies – entrepreneurs helped states to overcome logistical boundaries. This allowed the state to gradually expand its power.¹ When talking about private involvement in military affairs, the focus is predominantly on the *military enterpriser* as defined by Fritz Redlich, that is, those who supplied European rulers with mercenary forces.² Much less attention has been given to military enterprisers as financiers and suppliers of armies.³

Traditional accounts of military history between the Peace of Westphalia and the French Revolution emphasize the importance of the emergence and growth of military bureaucracies for financing and supplying these armies. Through these institutions, states supposedly intervened ever more directly in the management of their armed forces.⁴ Parrott, however, argued that, especially in the domains of finance and supply, contractors played an increasingly important role. No early modern state possessed the necessary institutions, nor were

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early modern states staffed with enough trained administrators, to supply or finance their armed force entirely through their own bureaucracies. Rather than curtailing the activities of private enterprisers all together, the need to maintain ever bigger armies on a permanent basis led to the development of a ‘contractor state’. The role of private enterprisers in provisioning remained unchallenged. It wasn’t until the French Revolution and the *levée en masse* armies that private contractors would be barred from this ‘sacred duty of the state’. But, nonetheless, from c. 1700 onwards supply contracts were increasingly managed by the (centralized) state bureaucracy. In his seminal *Coercion, Capital, and European States*, Charles Tilly went even further. The transition from a military and fiscal organization based on brokerage between rulers and military contractors to an increasing nationalization of the means to wage war, he argued, led to ‘drastically curtailing the involvement of private contractors’. The gradual attempts to increase state control over these supply networks did not lead to the exclusion of private merchants. As Gordon Bannerman described for the British army, ‘by 1763 […] a coherent supply structure had emerged within which contractors played a pivotal role.’ The question remains whether governments actually did try to limit the influence of enterprisers in state affairs? And did this lead to greater power of the state vis-à-vis these independent contractors?

The constant military pressure from the middle of the sixteenth century onwards placed the Netherlands at the centre of debates of the *military revolution*. The struggle between Spain and the young Dutch Republic was the catalyst behind the early Spanish burst of military innovation. The attention that the Netherlands have received is very badly distributed over time and space. The period after 1650 in the southern Netherlands has received only limited scholarly attention. The end of the struggle between Spain and the northern provinces, the Dutch Republic, in 1648, by no means meant the end of the military pressure in the south. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Carl von Clausewitz already recognized that it was in northern Italy, Rhenish Germany and the Netherlands that centralized, bureaucratic supply structures emerged from c. 1670 onwards. This had happened, according to Clausewitz, as a result

8 Bannerman, *Merchants*, 139.