THE DEFENSE OF THE CROWN OF ARAGON DURING THE WAR OF THE TWO PEDROS (1356–1366)¹

Donald J. Kagay
Albany State University

For many in the modern world, the study of strategy in the Hundred Years War (a conflict which took well over a century to unfold) is unthinkable if not downright ludicrous. It is the purpose of this paper to explore the military, administrative, and psychological underpinning of the complicated structure of defense that emerged during the War of the Two Pedros, a bitter border conflict of the mid-fourteenth century between Castile and the Crown of Aragon. In this struggle which consumed an entire decade (1356–1366), the centuries-old lessons of border fighting were used as two evenly-matched opponents dueled across frontiers that could change hands with lightning speed. The Castilian monarch, Pedro I “the Cruel” (1350–1366/69), showed himself a master of offensive warfare whose persistence and cunning should by all accounts have brought under his control broad swaths of Aragon and Valencia.² The Aragonese sovereign, Pere III “the Ceremonious” (1336–1387), was a mediocre soldier who seldom tested his courage in the “region of warfare and peril” that was the frontier.³ He was, however, a shrewd planner and administrator who saw that his very survival as a ruler depended on a willingness to exercise flexibility in conducting traditional border war while, at the same time, casting around for new and often innovative means of defense.

¹ An earlier version of this paper appeared in the Journal of Military History 71 (2007): 11–33.
To understand the defensive methods Pere III utilized to save his crown against the incessant military pressure of his Castilian adversary, one must review, in general terms, the mundane and theoretical lessons of strategic defense as they emerged over the centuries and then compare them specifically to the way of war during the greatest conflict of the fourteenth century.

Theoretical discussions of the defensive stances mounted by military forces of all sizes has a long provenance in Western Europe. Late antique military writers, such as Vegetius and the Byzantine Emperor, Maurice, put a considerable amount of information at the disposal of commanders attempting to defend their positions from enemy attack or to bolster their own assault troops with rear-line “defenders.”4 In the Renaissance, Machiavelli, reflecting the accepted military knowledge of the Middle Ages, characterized good commanders as those who do not attack unless “compelled to do so by absolute necessity.”5 Guicciardini and other Italian historians of this period praised more than one contemporary military leader “for waging war more with his mind than with his sword [while] . . . holding off the mighty and unconquerable legions of foreign peoples rather than challenging them to battle.”6

While updating the battlefield truisms of the preceding millennium, the greatest military expert of the nineteenth century, Carl von Clausewitz, continued to stress that “it is easier to hold ground than to take it” and “war serves the purpose of the defense more than that of the aggressor.”7 He repeatedly emphasized the importance of fortresses as not only refuges for weak or exhausted troops, but also as staging points for offensive operations.8 Within such strongholds, defenders could keep much greater forces at bay with a much smaller outlay in men and

---


