

## THE EARLY HISTORY OF MERCENARIES

### *Mercenaries in Antiquity*

Mercenarism – as any number of potted histories of the subject will tell you – is probably the second oldest profession on earth. (More than a few of these accounts borrow Ronald Reagan’s quip about politics: that it is a lot like the first.) The first mercenaries in the historical record were hired troops serving King Shulgi of Ur, approximately 2050 years before the birth of Christ, and the ancient world subsequently saw a great deal of mercenary activity. Notable are the Hebrews; Saul appears to have recruited mercenaries,<sup>1</sup> and the future King David seems to have commanded a mercenary force in between slaying Goliath and succeeding Saul. (Although he refused to fight Hebrews, he did fight for the Philistines.<sup>2</sup>) The most prominent ancient mercenaries, however, are the Greeks, who managed not only to fight in a goodly number of wars (particularly for the Persians<sup>3</sup>), including ones against other Greeks (there were Greeks on both sides of the battle of Marathon, for example;<sup>4</sup>), but also to leave written records. Herodotus is a lurid if unreliable source of mercenary anecdotes; Xenophon’s famous *Anabasis* concerns a failed mercenary enterprise followed by a successful escape out of Persia;<sup>5</sup> Demosthenes leaves us colourful (and sneering) reports of Phillip II of Macedonia’s reliance on mercenaries, apparently to compensate for the deficiencies of his famed phalanx<sup>6</sup>. Philip preferred full-time citizen-soldiers to mercenaries, but he did retain some specialists, especially cavalrymen and archers<sup>7</sup>, and mercenaries seem to have played a larger part in his strategies that was usual at that time in Greek warfare.<sup>8</sup> His famous son Alexander continued in this vein.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See 1 Samuel 14:52 – “...whenever Saul saw a mighty or brave man, he took him into his service.” This observation appears in Lanning, M.L. Lanning, M.L. *Mercenaries*, Ballantine Books, New York, 2005p. 9, but the reference is mistakenly given as 1 Samuel 15:52.

<sup>2</sup> Lanning, M.L. *Op. Cit.* p. 9

<sup>3</sup> Hornblower, S. *The Greek World 479 – 323 BC*, Methuen & Co., London, 1983, p. 6

<sup>4</sup> Meiggs, R. *The Athenian Empire*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1972, p. 37

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 70

<sup>6</sup> Griffith, G. T. *The Mercenaries of the Hellenistic World*, Cambridge University Press, 1935, p. 11

<sup>7</sup> Ellis, J.R. *Philip II and Macedonian Imperialism*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1986, p. 211

<sup>8</sup> Griffith, G. T. *Op. cit.* p. 11

<sup>9</sup> A fine source on this subject is Jouguet, P. *Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic World*, Ares Publishers, Chicago, (first published 1928; no date for this edition), pp. 4, 115, 127

From the Greeks, attention passes to the Romans, and their Carthaginian rivals. Carthage is especially noteworthy because of the especially important role played by mercenaries in its armed forces. The city had wealth and very talented commanders, but it did not have very many citizens to turn into soldiers - so it hired them.<sup>10</sup> Determining quite who was a mercenary, however, is a little tricky. The Libyans in Carthage's forces, for example, are frequently described as mercenaries, but they were probably forced to serve as part of a tribute to Carthage, the regional hegemon.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the Spanish, African and Italian troops hurriedly drafted into the Carthaginian ranks were there because Carthage controlled their home territories. They hardly qualify as mercenaries since they had little choice in the matter.<sup>12</sup> For this reason, "It would be a mistake to imagine that the majority of the soldiers in Carthage's armies ... were professional mercenaries."<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, no one seriously contests the claim that Carthage hired a fair number of mercenaries. In fact, to control them they employed an interesting technique:

The Carthaginians preferred to recruit their soldiers of fortune in the Barbarian countries of the West such as Iberia, Gaul, and Liguria, instead of among the Greek condottieri. This method of recruiting was cheaper. Furthermore, these half-savages were completely out of their element, in the regions where they were called upon to fight, and were generally too stupid to think of forming conspiracies and, as they spoke different languages, they could not communicate easily from one group to another. The officering of these armies was carefully studied, and only the lowest ranks were supplied by the natives, and these were chosen from among the veterans who had become loyal because they loved their trade. All the other officers were Carthaginians...<sup>14</sup>

These methods, however, were not wholly effective. After the First Punic War, Carthage looked to disband its hired army – whose members it had not paid. Nor could it pay them, because its wealth, already depleted by years of war, was being

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<sup>10</sup> *For an account of the Carthaginian armed forces, see Goldsworthy, A. In the Name of Rome, Phoenix, London, 2004, Chapter 2*

<sup>11</sup> Lazenby, J.F. Hannibal's War, Aris & Philips, Warminster, 1978, p. 9

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 8

<sup>13</sup> Loc. Cit.

<sup>14</sup> Picard, G.C. & Picard, C. Carthage, Sidgwick & Jackson, London, 1987 (first published 1968), p. 204

used up paying reparations to the Romans.<sup>15</sup> These mercenaries, led by some fairly educated ‘half-Greeks,’<sup>16</sup> revolted, and were only defeated through a skilful and bloody campaign waged by Hamilcar.<sup>17</sup> An even more fundamental problem was that Carthage’s strength rested, in large part, on wealth derived from trade and the command of resources. This was all very well during the Second Punic War, when Hannibal was loose in the rich Italian heartland, and the silver mines of Spain were in Carthage’s grip.<sup>18</sup> But when Spain fell to the Romans, and Scipio’s appearance in Africa forced Hannibal’s return, Carthage’s position was badly compromised.<sup>19</sup> As it happened, the decisive battle of Zama, in which Hannibal’s forces actually outnumbered Scipio’s, settled the Second Punic War.<sup>20</sup> In the longer term, though, Carthage could not have sustained large mercenary forces for war on home territory, when it was deprived of Spanish silver and where there was no prospect of plunder.<sup>21</sup>

The Romans initially stuck to their practice of fielding mostly citizen-soldiers; their militias being comprised of landowners. “Military service [was] a temporary break for soldiers from their normal life as peasants.”<sup>22</sup> There were of course exceptions. Julius Caesar, impressed with the formidable resistance he encountered while repelling Germanic intrusions in 58 – 55 BC, incorporated about 1000 German mercenaries, mainly cavalrymen, in his army for the campaigns against the Gauls in 52 BC.<sup>23</sup> However, conscription remained the dominant practice. However, as increased specialisation began to necessitate the division of labour, and the numbers of landowners dropped (in part because long military service caused farms to fail, forcing the owners to sell their land to a few wealthy landowners), Rome developed a professional army.<sup>24</sup> By the second century AD: “The professional army at the disposal of the Roman emperor ... contained some 450 000 troops, larger than any

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<sup>15</sup> Caven, B. The Punic Wars, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1980, p. 68

<sup>16</sup> Picard, G.C. & Picard, C. Op. Cit. p. 205

<sup>17</sup> De Beer, G. Hannibal, Thames and Hudson, London, 1974, p. 89

<sup>18</sup> Dorey, T.A. & Dudley, D.R. Rome Against Carthage, Doubleday, New York, 1972, p. 95

<sup>19</sup> Scullard, H.H. Scipio Africanus in the Second Punic War, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1929, p. 225

<sup>20</sup> *The decisive difference was the Roman cavalry, which first saw off their Carthaginian counterparts and then returned to break the veteran infantry.* Cottrell, L. Enemy of Rome, Evans Brothers, London, 1960, pp. 209 – 212

<sup>21</sup> Singer, P.W. Op. Cit. p. 21

<sup>22</sup> Goodman, M. The Roman World 44 B.C. – A.D. 180, Routledge, London & New York, 1997, p. 113

<sup>23</sup> Dyck, L. H. ‘Gaius Julius Caesar took advantage of his German enemies’ ferocity by enlisting them in his cavalry’ in Military History, Herndon, Vol. 22 Issue 4, July 2005, p. 66

<sup>24</sup> Marks, A.J. & Tingay, G.I.F. The Romans, Usborne, London, 1990, pp. 14 – 15

other army until comparatively recent times.”<sup>25</sup> The non-citizen portion of this force, however, which consisted of auxiliary troops (recruited in the provinces), barbarian troops and specialist archers and cavalry, may have contained as many as 220 000 men.<sup>26</sup> The great bulk of this non-citizen force was ‘barbarian,’ consisting of provincials who were recruited as professional soldiers serving between twenty and twenty-five years.<sup>27</sup> The old Republic had long included allied and auxiliary troops in its forces, but foreign enlistment on this scale was a new phenomenon, “Driven by the need for a larger army to defend the Empire’s lengthy and vulnerable borders.”<sup>28</sup>

Citizen soldiers were not available for two reasons. First, they did not wish to serve. Arther Ferril has pointed out that there were young men who cut off their own thumbs to avoid conscription, a practice that became common enough for emperors to make it a capital offence.<sup>29</sup> Resistance was common even in the early Empire. Augustus could not replace the three legions lost in the Teutoburg Forest in Germany because he could not find 15 000 new citizen soldiers out of a population of 5 million (of which 125 000 were already under arms). “As a percentage of the total number of citizens this figure is miniscule, and it reflects how serious the problem of conscription was.”<sup>30</sup> The second reason is that the bulk - and the best - of the citizens were essential to the Roman economy. “The reason why such a poor type of recruit was furnished by the Roman element is to be found in the lack of suitable men who could be spared from essential production...”<sup>31</sup>

These factors led to the barbarisation of the army, a fact commonly cited as a cause of the decline and fall of the Empire.<sup>32</sup> Towards the end, the army’s barbarian troops formed their own units under their own tribal commanders. They were not nearly as

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<sup>25</sup> Campbell, J.B. The Emperor and the Roman Army, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1984, p. 4

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. pp. 4 & 12

<sup>27</sup> Boak, A.E.R. Manpower Shortage and the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1974 (first published 1955) p. 93

<sup>28</sup> Boak, A.E.R. “Manpower Shortage and the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West” in Chambers, M. (ed.) The Fall of Rome: Can it be explained?, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York etc., 1970, p. 24

<sup>29</sup> Ferril, A. “The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire” in Kennedy, P. (ed.) Grand Strategies in War and Peace, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1991, p. 81

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 82

<sup>31</sup> Boak, A.E.R. Op. Cit. 1970, p. 24

<sup>32</sup> Salmon, E.T. “The Roman Army and the Disintegration of the Roman Empire” in Chambers, M. (ed.) The Fall of Rome: Can it be explained?, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York etc., 1970, p. 37; and, of course, Gibbon, E. The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Wordsworth, Ware, 1997 (originally published between 1776 and 1788), p. 581

strictly disciplined as their Roman counterparts, but they were better paid. Resentment amongst citizen soldiers raised fears of mutiny and so won them the same concessions.<sup>33</sup> As a result, the Roman army became a softer, laxer force: a shadow of its former self.

To what extent did the Romans employ mercenaries? The literature specifically concerned with mercenarism usually claims that the mercenary's role was considerable. For example, Peter Singer has written that,

Although early Rome was distinguished by its citizen army, it too was highly reliant on mercenaries. Even during the Republic period, it relied on hired units to fill such specialities as archers and cavalry. They were usually recruited from the economically backward areas of the ancient world... As the empire grew, the scope of these hired units gradually expanded, as it became relatively harder to recruit native Romans into the force. At the end of the third century C.E. the imperial army was more Germanic than Roman.<sup>34</sup>

Setting aside exceptional cases like Caesar's German cavalry, what remains unclear is whether non-native Romans who played such a dominant role really qualify as mercenaries. In the literature specifically concerned with the Roman army, these 'foreign' soldiers are generally described as auxiliary or allied units.<sup>35</sup> One piece of evidence that they were not mercenaries is their reward: from the reign of Claudius, veterans received citizenship and *conubium*<sup>36</sup> (whereby any existing or future marriages were recognised under Roman civic law, so that offspring also became citizens)<sup>37</sup>. This suggests a more patriotic motive than the concept of mercenarism

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<sup>33</sup> Ferrill, A. *Op. Cit.* pp. 82 – 83

<sup>34</sup> Singer, P.W. *Op. Cit.* p. 21

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Goldsworthy, A.K. *The Roman Army at War*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998, pp. 18 – 19; Speidel, M. *Roman Army Studies, Volume I*, J.C. Gieben, Amsterdam, 1984, p. 83; Campbell, B. *War and Society in Imperial Rome 31 B.C. – A.D. 284*, Routledge, London & New York, 2002, p. 25 *It would make sense for the Romans to hire mercenaries in the archery and cavalry line if they themselves lacked those skills, and it seems they usually did. But what makes it difficult to call these foreigners mercenaries is that they were provided by allies, or came from parts of the Empire itself, so they were hardly independent bands of soldiers fighting for whomever could afford them. See Hyland, N. *Equus: The Horse in the Roman World*, Batsford, London, 1990, p. 73; Gabba, E. *Republican Rome, The Army and the Allies*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1976, especially p. 1 – 19; Dixon, K.R. & Southern, P. *The Roman Cavalry*, Batsford, London, 1992, p. 78*

<sup>36</sup> Keppie, L. *The Making of the Roman Army*, Batsford, London, 1984, p. 185

<sup>37</sup> Nicholas, B. *An Introduction to Roman Law*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975, pp. 64 – 65

normally admits. Furthermore, the ‘foreign’ soldiers were actually themselves residents of the empire, even if they were not citizens, because their territories were integrated into the imperial realm.<sup>38</sup> In fact, when Caracalla issued his *Constitutio Antoniniana* in A.D. 212, all the freeborn inhabitants of the Empire became citizens.<sup>39</sup> Thus to characterise the Roman army as reliant on mercenaries because it *came to be* [was] full of Germans is to miss the fact that they were not really foreigners: they were from the margins of the Empire, but they were still from the Empire.<sup>40</sup> To call them mercenaries probably requires your subject to be mercenaries, not Romans, so that you have a vested interest in discovering mercenarism throughout history.

The Eastern Empire, by contrast, also recruited mercenaries and the inhabitants of conquered territories, but provided the right leadership, discipline and pay to make it work at least passably well. Constantinople outlasted Rome by almost a thousand years, its fall in 1453 AD being primarily attributable to the rise of Islamic power.

### *Medieval Mercenaries*

To leap from the collapse of the Western Empire straight to the demise of its Eastern counterpart is to ignore the European Middle Ages – which saw plentiful mercenary activity, and provides the evidence for a few general conclusions. Europe’s rulers had access to several sources of combatants. The emergence of surplus populations in cities created one ready supply of manpower. Hence in 1066 we find Godwin, *en route* to the Battle of Hastings, stopping in London to bolster his numbers.<sup>41</sup> A second source, the commonest (in every sense), were the serfs, who required land and security and got them from feudal lords in exchange for military service.<sup>42</sup> A serf’s commitment to year-round agricultural labour, however, meant that his term of

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<sup>38</sup> Mann, J.C. Occasional Paper No. 7: Legionary Recruitment and Veteran Settlement During the Principate, University of London, Institute of Archaeology, London, 1983, pp. 1 – 3

<sup>39</sup> Salmon, E.T. Op. Cit. p. 45

<sup>40</sup> MacMullen, R. Soldier and Civilian in the Later Roman Empire, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1963, p. 153

<sup>41</sup> Brooke, C. London 800 – 1216: The Shaping of a City, Secker and Warburg, London, 1975, pp. 26 – 27

<sup>42</sup> Abbot, W. C. The Expansion of Europe, F. S. Crofts & Co., New York, 1938, p. 17; Allmand, C. The Hundred Years War, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, p. 92

service was necessarily limited.<sup>43</sup> In fact, the feasibility of William the Conqueror's invasion was threatened because the short feudal spell of duty meant a peasant army would only serve for forty days. The impossibility of fighting a foreign campaign with such a force meant drawing on a third source of manpower, and experience: foreign mercenaries. When William did invade England, his ships were "packed with mercenaries from many distant places".<sup>44</sup>

The critical impact of crossbows on the outcome of the Battle of Hastings established an important principle. The nature of war had become such that skilled soldiers, proficient with new technologies, counted for more than masses of ordinary fighters.<sup>45</sup> The ensuing demand for expertise created a viable export industry for various city-states and other communities.<sup>46</sup> Pisa and Genoa, for example, became recognised providers of crossbowmen.<sup>47</sup> In this way, state or city brands were established, and mercenaries fought for the reputation of these brands, their personal reputations, and for profit.<sup>48</sup>

It is interesting to note that when mercenaries failed their employers, it was not because they lacked the will to fight, or because of any shameless mercenary treachery, but on account of technological change. Genoese crossbowmen fighting for the French at Crecy in 1346, for example, were beaten by the introduction of the longbow, superior to the crossbow in range, in rate of fire, in ease of loading and aiming, and with a penetrating power that necessitated a revolution in armour plating.<sup>49</sup> Almost exactly the same thing happened three hundred years later, when the hitherto superior Swiss mercenaries, armed with pikes and halberds, encountered muskets and cannon. At the battle of La Bicocca, north of Milan, in 1522,

French-hired Swiss infantry, armed only with pikes and halberds, attacked Spanish infantrymen armed with arquebuses. The musket fire left half the

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<sup>43</sup> Singer, P. W. Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Private Military Companies, Cornell University Press, Ithaca & London, 2004, p. 22

<sup>44</sup> Trease, G. The Condottieri, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York etc., 1971, pp. 16 - 17

<sup>45</sup> Tilley, A. Medieval France, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1922, pp. 162 - 163

<sup>46</sup> Allmand, C. Op. cit. p. 73

<sup>47</sup> Lanning, M. L. Op. cit. p. 37

<sup>48</sup> Holmes, G. Europe: Hierarchy and Revolt 1320 – 1450, Fontana/Collins, London, 1975, p. 33

<sup>49</sup> Allmand, C. Op. cit. p. 61

Swiss dead or dying in front of the Spanish trenches. The Swiss mercenaries agreed to attack once again only if their officers led the charge. They did so, only to fall a second time to a hail of bullets. The third and final attack, supported by French cavalry, also failed. On the field of La Bicocca lay more than three thousand dead soldiers and the reputation of the Swiss halberdmen as the finest infantry in all of Europe that money could hire.<sup>50</sup>

That speaks of a lack of technology, not will.

If mercenaries were hired for their skills, which developments led to their not being hired? As cities were fortified, the nature of engagements changed from battles on open terrain to prolonged sieges. The expense of hiring mercenaries for protracted campaigns made them less attractive than professional civilian armies. The increasing wealth of cities, however, and the fact that open combat still occurred, ensured that mercenarism in the Middle Ages was not a profession threatened with extinction.<sup>51</sup> It was, however, met with some moral opprobrium. This was driven by mercenary conduct, which was – predictably – atrocious, and probably even worse than that of other combatants. The *Magna Carta*, sealed in June 1215,<sup>52</sup> included a provision requiring King John to ‘banish from this kingdom’ his mercenary forces ‘as soon as peace [between the Normans and the Saxons was] restored.’ This promise was partially fulfilled, and writs of disbandment were issued, but foreigners were promptly re-enlisted after the renewal of the civil war.<sup>53</sup> The English also continued to use mercenaries in foreign ventures.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, the Third Lateran Conference of Catholic leaders, held in 1179, denounced mercenaries. Nonetheless, less than half a century later, soldiers of fortune fought for the Pope in Italy.<sup>55</sup> It can thus be seen that although there was clearly aversion to mercenaries in medieval Europe, even the institutions voicing these sentiments did not, apparently, find them completely persuasive.

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<sup>50</sup> Lanning, M.L. *Op. Cit.* p. 59

<sup>51</sup> Singer, P. W. *Op. cit.* p. 22, Allmand, C. *Op. cit.* p. 73

<sup>52</sup> McKechnie, W. S. *Magna Carta* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.), Glasgow University Press, Glasgow, 1913, p. 38

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 447 - 48

<sup>54</sup> Neillands, R. *The Hundred Years War*, Routledge, London & New York, 1991, p. 64

<sup>55</sup> Lanning, M. L. *Op. Cit.* p. 39

Mercenaries frequently appear when a war or arms build-up *ends* (as happened after apartheid and the Cold War). This is because experienced soldiers have acquired potentially valuable skills; if they find themselves at loose ends, they might well become mercenaries. This is precisely what happened at the end of the Hundred Years' War, halfway through the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>56</sup> A war of that duration and scale (it ran in fits and starts from 1337 until 1453) produces large numbers of soldiers, which its conclusion renders superfluous.<sup>57</sup> The English soldiers made redundant by peace with France duly became mercenaries. However, they did not enter the employ of any foreign power, but simply collected themselves into companies and set about looting the landscape.<sup>58</sup> They were not alone in this: their peers in the enterprise included soldiers from Brittany and Gascony<sup>59</sup>, and members of the lower nobility forced to earn a living by 'ransom and booty'.<sup>60</sup> However, the English predominated to the extent that by the mid-fourteenth century these groups were generically known as 'Les Anglais'.<sup>61</sup> The fact that it came to be said in Italy that an Englishman was the *diavolo incarnato* – the devil in person – suggests just how scared people were of mercenary bands with the power to do as they pleased.<sup>62</sup> In this case, though, they were stopped by orders from England, and fear of trying to fight both England and France. Only then did these veterans look to sell their services to governments. They found buyers in the duelling city-states of Italy, where they and their kind were known as *condottieri*, a word derived from the Italian for 'troop under contract'.<sup>63</sup> So respectable was this employment that it was listed, in a mid-fourteenth century treatise by a Burgundian gentleman, under "noble feats of arms", together with duelling, jousting, and fighting for one's lord.<sup>64</sup>

The idea of an autonomous company of soldiers, however, can be traced to a German soldier named Roger di Flor, "the father of all condottieri" who established the first

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<sup>56</sup> Singer, P. W. *Op. cit.* pp. 23 - 24

<sup>57</sup> Lanning, M. L. *Op. cit.* p. 43

<sup>58</sup> Tilley, A. *Medieval France*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1922, pp. 149 - 150

<sup>59</sup> Allmand, C. *Op. cit.* p. 74

<sup>60</sup> Fowler, K. *The Hundred Years War*, The MacMillan Press, London, 1921, p. 8

<sup>61</sup> Allmand, C. *Op. cit.* pp. 74 - 75

<sup>62</sup> Pullan, B. *A History of Early Renaissance Italy*, Allen Lane, London, 1973, p.p. 260 – 61, Allmand, *Op. cit.* p. 75

<sup>63</sup> Singer, P. W. *Op. cit.* p. 23

<sup>64</sup> Holmes, G. *Op. cit.* p. 33

such organization in 1281.<sup>65</sup> Called the Catalan Company (after its origins in northeastern Spain), it amply demonstrated the danger mercenaries pose to their employers. Two of its contracts demonstrate the point. The first concerns its employment by the Emperor Andronicus II in Constantinople. It fought successfully, but proved equally adept at looting territory belonging to the Empire's allies, amongst other excesses. The Emperor, alarmed, had Roger di Flor killed, but that only provoked an orgy of revenge looting.<sup>66</sup> The second contract was signed with the Duke of Athens. Once again, the Catalan Company excelled in battle, capturing no less than 30 castles belonging to the Duke's foes – but ultimately turned against their employer. In this case, the Duke rather foolishly released them from their duties without paying them. In retaliation, they butchered the Duke's own forces and took over the city.<sup>67</sup> They would rule Athens for more than sixty years.<sup>68</sup>

### *Mercenaries in the Renaissance and Modernity*

The prominence of mercenary companies in Italy coincided with the beginning of a new era; “by 1500, the renaissance of European culture was well under way and social pluralism, expanding commerce, and technological achievements provided the basis for a new era in global politics.”<sup>69</sup> Mercenarism would remain a familiar feature of European war fighting until the 1800s.

It is curious that mercenaries, so widely reviled as vicious and barbaric, should have been so active in Italy even as that peninsula became the cradle of the renaissance. The fundamental reason for this is that the Italian states were divided but rich.<sup>70</sup> The divisions ensured a plentiful supply of protagonists, and the wealth meant that they could hire mercenaries – and fund the arts. Hiring mercenaries also meant that valuable citizens, whose trading activities had created the wealth in the first place, would not be called upon to perish wastefully in combat.<sup>71</sup> Conditions in renaissance

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<sup>65</sup> Trease, G. *Op. cit.* p. 27

<sup>66</sup> Lanning, M. L. *Op. cit.*, pp. 42 - 43

<sup>67</sup> Trease, G. *Op. cit.* pp. 32 – 36

<sup>68</sup> Singer, P. W. *Op. cit.* p. 25, Holmes, G. *Op. cit.* pp. 65, 215

<sup>69</sup> Huntington, S.P. *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, Free Press, London etc., 2002 (first edition 1996), p. 50

<sup>70</sup> Holmes, G. *Op. cit.* pp. 283 – 84, Singer, P. W. *Op. cit.* p. 25

<sup>71</sup> Singer, P.W. *Op. Cit.* p. 22

Italy were therefore highly conducive to the flourishing of both mercenaries and artists.

What is even more counterintuitive is that some of these mercenaries furthered the cause of civilisation. Francesco Sforza, for example, was the commander of a mercenary company, in which capacity he met the Duke of Milan. The Duke must have formed a favourable impression of the mercenary because he offered him his daughter's hand in marriage.<sup>72</sup> Upon the Duke's death in 1450, Sforza and his company took control of Milan.<sup>73</sup> Since he was apparently the only man able to ensure security in an age of instability (and deter the threat posed by the ambitions of Alfonso of Naples), he was supported by other powerful rulers of the time, notably Cosimo de' Medici in Florence. From this position, he achieved harmony between Venice, Florence and Milan through the Peace of Lodi, and saw Milan turned into a centre of culture and learning.<sup>74</sup> "[He] ruled Milan peacefully and efficiently for sixteen years, taking his place amongst the great humanist patrons of the Renaissance."<sup>75</sup> Another mercenary captain, Federigo da Montefeltro, who became the Duke of Urbino, was an equally dramatic exception to the mercenary stereotype. He apparently spent the bulk of his wealth on the arts, churches, schools and charity, and established a great library.<sup>76</sup>

Of course, mercenaries did not become reformed characters the instant they set foot on Italian soil. The condottieri were certainly guilty of their share of beastliness.<sup>77</sup> They also had their failings on a purely military level. Machiavelli famously criticised them on two levels, as either good soldiers who were therefore a threat to their employers, or bad soldiers, and consequently useless.<sup>78</sup> Condottieri had a tendency to fight for the highest bidder, irrespective of any existing contract. In fact, to say they fought might be too strong, because mercenary commanders (careful of their popularity) were reportedly hesitant to risk their men's lives. "... Opposing mercenary

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<sup>72</sup> Martines, L. Power and Imagination: City States in Renaissance Italy, Vintage Books, New York, 1980, p. 141

<sup>73</sup> Lanning, M. L. Op. cit. pp. 48 - 49

<sup>74</sup> Holmes, G. Op. cit. pp. 299 - 300, Pullan, B. Op. cit. pp. 260 - 62

<sup>75</sup> Trease, G. Op. Cit. p. 284

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. pp. 316 - 317

<sup>77</sup> Abbott, W. C. Op. cit. I, p. 133

<sup>78</sup> Machiavelli, N. The Prince, Penguin Books, London etc., 1999 (written in 1513), p. 40.

armies often met, put on a show of manoeuvre and arms, and then decided a battle's outcome with a peaceful meeting of the leaders..."<sup>79</sup> It was this tendency to settle a disputes peacefully that provoked Machiavelli's scornful comment that mercenaries only fought in 'bloodless wars' – although, as we have seen, this was not wholly justified.<sup>80</sup> Mercenary captains were also ambitious, imperilling the political security of their retainers.<sup>81</sup> Ultimately, whilst the condottieri had strength sufficient for internecine Italian feuds, they lacked the capacity and the will to resist foreign aggression – starting with the French, who invaded in 1494.<sup>82</sup>

Interestingly, however, the alternative to contract armies was tried – and discarded. Florence tried to build a citizen army in imitation of the Romans, but it was uncompetitive. "After their city militia continually lost to smaller mercenary armies, Florence too began to employ hired units."<sup>83</sup>

The failure of Swiss mercenaries at Le Bicocca has already been mentioned, but their successes and qualities have been omitted. This is undeserved, because Swiss mercenaries were skilled practitioners of the mercenary trade; for example, when Charles VIII of France invaded Italy, his march on Naples "was practically unresisted partly because of the fear felt for the 8000 Swiss in this pay".<sup>84</sup> The Swiss also made a fair attempt at regulating the profession.<sup>85</sup> Canton leaders forbade Swiss mercenaries to fight against each other, or against the federation's allies.<sup>86</sup> They were also careful to guarantee their own security; for example, in 1481 Louis XI of France was only permitted to hire Swiss mercenaries on the condition that they would be allowed to return home if needed.<sup>87</sup> The Swiss were hired not only as ordinary combat infantrymen, but also as bodyguards. They formed a remarkable reputation for loyalty, exemplified by more than one dramatic last stand. For example, the 100-man bodyguard of French King Francis I perished defending their employer in 1525,

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<sup>79</sup> Lanning, M.L. *Op. Cit.* p. 50

<sup>80</sup> Singer, P. W. *Op. cit.* p. 25, Trease, G. *Op. cit.* p. 340

<sup>81</sup> Pullan, B. *Op. cit.* p. 259

<sup>82</sup> Abbot, W. C. *Op. cit.* p. 132, Trease, G. *Op. cit.* p. 341,

<sup>83</sup> Singer, P.W. *Op. Cit.* p. 23

<sup>84</sup> Bonjour E., Offler H. S. and Potter G. R. *A Short History of Switzerland*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1952, p. 142

<sup>85</sup> Lanning, M. L. *Op. cit.* pp. 52 - 53

<sup>86</sup> Kohn, H. *Nationalism & Liberty: The Swiss Example*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1956, p. 17

<sup>87</sup> Lanning, M. L. *Op. cit.* pp. 55 - 56

during a contest with the Spanish over control of northern Italy; 147 Swiss died protecting Pope Clement VII against the forces of Spanish King Charles V in 1527; Louis XVI's Swiss guards all succumbed to the revolutionaries in 1792.<sup>88</sup>

Switzerland (much like Nepal today) established a reputation as a provider of military strength.<sup>89</sup> The Cantons – thanks to a system originally designed to provide forces to safeguard Swiss independence – required male citizens between the ages of sixteen and sixty to be available for military duty.<sup>90</sup> This supply of manpower they then sold on the open market. For their part, these citizen-mercenaries were drawn to the rewards and adventure of the enterprise. At the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, military services had become the Confederation's most lucrative export.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, it was reportedly hard for young Swiss men in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century to find any living but war.<sup>92</sup> It has been said that it was only when artillery became a decisive factor in armed conflicts that 'war ceased to be the only profitable national industry in Switzerland'.<sup>93</sup>

Their most prominent rivals in the industry, from the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, were the German *landsknechts*. Unlike the Swiss forces, *landsknechts* were also used to control the German civilian population; as in 1493, during the reign of Maximilian I.<sup>94</sup> They also developed a infamous reputation for brutality, especially towards innocents.<sup>95</sup> Despite these differences, however, the *landsknechts* were essentially a copy of the successful Swiss model.<sup>96</sup> As is usual with copies, the quality was inferior, but improvements were more rapid. Thus whilst the Swiss persisted with ruinous pike charges in the face of firearms, the *landsknechts* started using harquebus guns and artillery. For this reason they outlasted their Swiss competitors, surviving well into the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>97</sup> In fact, it is probably a German who can claim to be 'the last major condottiere in history'. The brilliant but utterly unprincipled Albert Wenzel von Wallenstein, who conquered large parts of Northern Europe between 1625 – 29 and is

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 59 - 60

<sup>89</sup> Calmette, J. *The Golden Age of Burgundy*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1962, pp. 270 – 271

<sup>90</sup> Singer, P.W. *Op. Cit.* p. 27

<sup>91</sup> Lanning, M. L. *Op. cit.* pp. 54 - 55

<sup>92</sup> Bonjour E. *Op. cit.* p. 107

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 120 - 21

<sup>94</sup> Benecke, G. *Maximilian I (1459 – 1519): An analytical biography* Routledge & Kegan Paul, London etc. 1982, p. 52

<sup>95</sup> Tenbrock, R-H. *A History of Germany*, Dine, P. J. (trans.), Longmans, London, 1969, p. 111

<sup>96</sup> Flenley, R. *Modern German History*, J. M. Dent & Sons, London, 1959, p. 8

<sup>97</sup> Singer, P. W. *Op. cit.* pp. 27 - 28

generally blamed for making the Thirty Years War ‘the most savage in European history’, was assassinated by his own masters on 24 February 1634.<sup>98</sup>

Ireland was another prominent source of mercenaries, particularly in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries (although there is evidence of Irish cavalry working for the English to guard the Scottish border as far back as the 13th century).<sup>99</sup> Irish mercenarism, however, was unusual in its motives. The familiar aspirations for profit and excitement were of course a factor. But so too – despite some contrary examples – was the desire to continue the fight against the English.<sup>100</sup> English success in crushing Irish rebellions removed the possibility of fighting for Ireland, from Ireland,<sup>101</sup> but Irish brigades could fight with the Dutch or French armies against the English.<sup>102</sup> Having established themselves as mercenaries, the Irish did fight for and against many other armies, but their animosity for the English diluted their mercenary motives, such that the Irish brigades who joined Bonny Prince Charlie’s Scottish rebellion were really volunteers, not mercenaries. The same pattern was evident in the American War of Independence. A few Catholic forces, true to their mercenary origins, fought in exchange for a bounty.<sup>103</sup> Others displayed a mercenary fickleness in their allegiance, to the extent that the British “‘were able to form a corps of ‘Volunteers of Ireland’” largely composed of deserters from Patriot regiments.<sup>104</sup> That said, however, the majority of Irish participants, were volunteers, anti-English prospective citizens who, according to one commentator, formed the ‘spirited backbone of the fight for Independence’.<sup>105</sup>

The War of Independence also saw the use of Germany mercenaries, known as Hessians after their common home state, Hesse-Cassel.<sup>106</sup> With their land forces weak, the British Cabinet accepted the necessity of hiring mercenaries.<sup>107</sup> Thousands

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<sup>98</sup> Maehl, W. H. Germany in Western Civilization, The University of Alabama Press, 1979, p. 187, 190

<sup>99</sup> Lanning, M.L. Op. Cit. p. 65

<sup>100</sup> Garvin, T. The Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics, Holmes & Meier, New York, 1981, p. 8

<sup>101</sup> O’Brien, G. Anglo-Irish Politics, Irish Academic Press, Dublin, 1987, p. 28

<sup>102</sup> O’Connell, M. R. Irish Politics and Social Conflict in the Age of the American Revolution, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1965, p. 70; Beckett, J. C. The Making of Modern Ireland, Faber & Faber, London, 1966, pp. 211 – 12; Lanning M. L. Op. cit. p. 68

<sup>103</sup> O’Connell, M. R. Op. cit., p. 70

<sup>104</sup> Alden, J. R. A History of the American Revolution, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1969, p. 252

<sup>105</sup> *Irish volunteers, it should be noted, did fight for both sides: A ‘loyal militia’ was dispatched for fight for the English early in the war.* McDowell, R.B. Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1979, pp. 239 – 40, Alden J. R. Op. cit. p. 252

<sup>106</sup> Lanning, M. L. Op. cit. p. 79

<sup>107</sup> Alden, J. Op. cit. pp. 177 - 79

of Hessians crossed the Atlantic in 1776 – the final total was 29 875 men<sup>108</sup> - and the army that British commander General Sir William Howe would acclaim as ‘one of the finest he had ever seen’ was more than a third Hessian.<sup>109</sup> Although they lacked the training of British soldiers<sup>110</sup>, they played at least a fairly important role in the King’s forces;<sup>111</sup> being large responsible, for example, for the British capture of Ticonderoga.<sup>112</sup> Historians are somewhat divided on their value. The Hessians seem to have accepted casualties – witness, for example, their insistence that for ‘reasons of honour’ they should occupy ‘the position of greatest danger’ when facing Washington across the Delaware during the winter of 1775. (1000 of the 3500 Hessians were killed or taken prisoner in the ensuing attack.<sup>113</sup>) Yet, they were paid little, with the bulk of their fee going to their rulers, and some suggest that their corresponding lack of will to fight hampered the British war effort.<sup>114</sup> The Hessians are also accused of mass desertion, with some estimates suggesting that roughly a third of the total force had deserted by the war’s end.<sup>115</sup> Finally, their very presence worked against the British. News that the British King intended to use German mercenaries against what were then his own citizens had an incendiary effect on mounting Patriot outrage at the beginning of the war, and a provision objecting to the use of mercenaries can be found in the Declaration of Independence.<sup>116</sup> Benjamin Franklin’s propaganda, instrumental in securing French assistance for the Patriots, also played heavily on the use of mercenaries.<sup>117</sup>

The history of companies with large-scale autonomous militaries really begins with the establishment of the two most important examples: the English East India Company (formed in 1599) and the Dutch East India Company (formed in 1602). The Dutch Company’s forces ultimately amounted to some 140 ships and 25 000 men,

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<sup>108</sup> Singer, P. W. *Op. cit.* p. 33

<sup>109</sup> Macksey, P *The War for America 1775-1783* Longmans, London, 1964, p. 86, Alden, J. *Op. cit.* pp. 211, 221

<sup>110</sup> Alden, J. *Op. cit.* p. 248

<sup>111</sup> Lanning, M. L. *Op. cit.* p. 82

<sup>112</sup> Alden, J. *Op. cit.* p. 314

<sup>113</sup> Singer, P. W. *Op. cit.* p. 33, Alden, J. *Op. cit.* pp. 280 - 82

<sup>114</sup> Lanning, M, L. *Op. cit.* pp. 85, 88

<sup>115</sup> Singer, P. W. *Op. cit.* p. 33, Lanning, M. L. *Op. cit.*, p. 85, Alden J. *Op. cit.* p. 391. *Some figures dispute this – for example, only 219 Hessians appear to have deserted during the disastrous first six months of 1778, suggesting that troops might have stayed to join the large German colonial population after the war, rather than actually deserting while the fight continued – Macksey P. Op. cit. p. 219*

<sup>116</sup> Singer, P. W., *Op. cit.* p. 33, Alden J. *Op. cit.*, pp. 229 - 30

<sup>117</sup> Alden, J. *Op. cit.* pp. 377 - 79

mainly Japanese mercenaries and hired German soldiers.<sup>118</sup> The company also at one point hired English soldiers to protect its tentative ‘New Netherland’ settlement on the northeastern seaboard of the United States.<sup>119</sup> At the height of its power, the company fought independent wars, both in defence of its fledgling colony in modern-day Brazil, and to gain control of markets in the area of what is today Indonesia by repelling the Portuguese and Spanish traders and beating recalcitrant local rulers into submission.<sup>120</sup> The use of these forces proved highly profitable for several decades, until rising British naval power caused the Dutch Company’s income to fall whilst increasing the need for armed protection.<sup>121</sup> Resources were also drained by a long and fruitless war with Portugal in South America – begun, interestingly enough, *against* the explicit orders of the Dutch government. These unsupported costs contributed heavily to the Company’s multiple bankruptcies and its eventual collapse during the Napoleonic wars.<sup>122</sup>

The English Company controlled a still larger force. By 1789, its army, consisting of British, Swiss and German mercenaries, together with local Sepoy units, comprised over 100 000 men, far larger than the English army of the time.<sup>123</sup> It employed similar strong-arm tactics to the Dutch, which eventually brought the two Companies into conflict - business rivalries in India being a major cause of the Anglo-Dutch wars of the 1660s.<sup>124</sup> It also, on occasion, flagrantly ignored its government, attacking Portuguese settlements in India. But the English Company, to an even greater extent than the Dutch, was a victim of its own success, wielding more power than a body of merchants could begin to use; its forces largely useless in the absence of any real opposition.<sup>125</sup> One indication of the dominance these firms could achieve is that, although the English firm went bankrupt in the 1830s, it was propped up by the

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<sup>118</sup> Singer, P. W., *Op. cit.* pp. 34 - 35

<sup>119</sup> Geyl, P. *The Netherlands in the Seventeenth Century: Part I (1609 – 1648)*, Ernest Benn Ltd., London, 1961, p. 206

<sup>120</sup> Landes, D. *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, Abacus, London, 1999, p. 141, Singer, P. W. *Op. cit.* p. 35

<sup>121</sup> Geyl, P. *Op. cit.* pp. 188 - 90

<sup>122</sup> Singer, P. W. *Op. cit.* p. 36

<sup>123</sup> Singer, P. W. *Op. cit.* pp. 35 – 36

<sup>124</sup> Innes, A. D. *A History of the British Nation*, T. C. & E. Jack, London and Edinburgh, 1912, p. 472, Geyl, P. *Op. cit.* p. 26

<sup>125</sup> Singer, P. W., *Op. cit.* p. 36

Crown until such time as the home government could feasibly assume the Company's rule in India. It was only finally dissolved in 1858.<sup>126</sup>

The use of mercenaries, so long a central feature of European war, was in steep decline by 1800. The symbol of the change was probably the execution of Louis XVI in 1793: as R. R. Palmer put, "The wars of kings were over; the wars of peoples had begun."<sup>127</sup> The wars of people were not privatised largely because militaries became much bigger, and conscription was a better source of numbers than the market. Consider, by way of comparison, that a Swiss mercenary company employed by Naples in the late 1400s consisted of 2 000 men. Napoleon's greatest victory, at Austerlitz in 1805, saw his 73 000 troops overcome 90 000 Austrians and Russians. The next year, his Grand Armée marched into Prussia 200 000 strong. By the time Napoleon invaded Russia in 1812 he had 600 000 troops.<sup>128</sup> Mercenaries could not compete in a quantity game, and they were not better off for quality, either. Experienced soldiers with rare skills – with crossbows, with longbows, with halberds, et cetera – who had long found employment as mercenaries, were made redundant by the new muskets, which required little skill of their operator. Massed ranks of musketeers were preferable to small elite forces. Finally, mercenary bands that had formerly roamed the landscape abusing the citizenry became intolerable. The citizenry were the tax base of the modern state. They were a valuable resource for the government, and were not to be menaced and plundered.

These powerful historical forces were matched by moral and intellectual developments. States gave rise to patriotism; the wars of people were wars of nations fighting for their countries. People who fought solely for profit, who had been such a natural part of European wars, were increasingly at odds with the moral climate.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Innes, A. D. *Op. cit.* pp. 717 – 18

<sup>127</sup> Cited in Huntington, S.P. "The clash of civilisations?" *Foreign Affairs*, New York, Summer 1993, Vol. 72, Issue 3, p. 22

<sup>128</sup> Abbot, W. C. *Op. cit.* II, p. 396, *see also generally* Innes, A. D. *Op. cit.* pp. 743 - 67

<sup>129</sup> *For a discussion of this change in the moral and political climate, see generally* Gellner, E. *Encounters with Nationalism*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1994; Hobsbawm, E. J. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Canto, Cambridge, 1995 (originally 1990); Ignatieff, M. *Blood and Belonging*, Vintage, London, 1994; and Kedourie, E. *Nationalism (4<sup>th</sup> Ed.)* Blackwell, Oxford etc., 1993 (originally 1960)

Obviously, mercenarism did not simply expire alongside the French monarchy. Napoleon used some mercenaries, although he lost them in the disastrous Russian campaign. The English were among the last to employ mercenaries, hiring them for the Crimean war in 1853, although they arrived too late to fight.<sup>130</sup> The great shift, however, was from an era in which war was the biggest industry in Europe and mercenary bands proliferated; to an age where militaries were huge national institutions and mercenaries were a mere sideshow; until finally they faded away.

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<sup>130</sup> Singer, P. W. Op. cit. p. 32