



## *Empires of the Weak: The Real Story of European Expansion and the Creation of the New World Order* by J.C. Sharman.

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Ever since historian Michael Roberts coined the term “Military Revolution,”<sup>1</sup> scholars have used it to characterize how the creation of a European military system in the early modern period ultimately led to global expansion and conquest. At the same time, however, military historians have challenged various aspects of his thesis so effectively that even scholars<sup>2</sup> who still use the term Military Revolution define it quite differently from Roberts’s original model.

Specialists in the military history of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas have even shown that the European system either was not applied at all in some parts of the world, or was less effective than local ones prior to industrialization in the nineteenth century. In *Empires of the Weak*, political scientist J.C. Sharman (Univ. of Cambridge) counters his fellow political scientists, as well as many historians who still accept Roberts’s model. He astutely synthesizes the work of military historians to offer a more accurate global model of military and political change during and since the early modern period.

The author begins by identifying basic flaws in the Military Revolution model as it has been applied to the pre-nineteenth-century expansion of European colonies and trading networks. For Roberts, the key issue was the adoption of firearms and concomitant development of tactics that enabled European armies to use them most effectively. Since firearms of the era were inaccurate and hard to load, the best way to exploit them on a battlefield was to deploy mass formations trained to use volley fire. Musketeer units, for instance, were integrated with formations of pikemen to protect them against cavalry. The advent of gunpowder also made possible field and siege artillery and new (and expensive) fortress designs. This in turn forced states to bureaucratize, the better to increase revenue. Larger states were able to field more forces and even army groups in a given theater. Other states either strove to adapt their military systems to keep up with their rivals or simply fell behind.

While this model clarifies reasonably well certain aspects of early modern European history, notably the Thirty Years War, it does not, Sharman argues, apply so well to European colonial ventures. These featured non-professional soldiers and smaller armies comprised mainly of local allies. All sides possessed gunpowder weapons, which were of limited value in Asia and North Africa, and artillery fortresses were rarely helpful. Moreover, most expeditions were privately mounted and seldom compatible with the larger strategic initiatives of European governments.

Sharman proceeds to a series of case studies, beginning with Spanish and Portuguese colonial ventures in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. He presents the spectacular successes

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1. See “The Military Revolution 1560–1660” [1955], in *The Military Revolution Debate: Readings in the Military Transformation of Early Modern Europe*, ed. Clifford Rogers (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995) 13–35.

2. E.g., Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500–1800*, 2nd ed. (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 1996).

of Spanish *conquistadores* in Mexico and Peru as anomalies made possible by disease, native allies, and pre-existing imperial structures that the Spanish could simply take over. Elsewhere in the Americas, native peoples retained power for long periods of time, not because they learned to imitate the Europeans, as some versions of the Military Revolution model would seem to predict, but because they followed their own traditions and borrowed little from Europeans. The author cites the example of the Mapuche people in present-day Chile, who defeated the Spanish only years after their arrival in 1550, and kept them out until the 1860s.

What explains the radically different result of Mapuche resistance here compared to the Aztecs and Incas? Notably even as late as the nineteenth century the Mapuche generally stuck to using their own weapons: bows and arrows, slings, clubs, lassos, and long pikes, though the last were increasingly tipped with steel from splintered Spanish swords. Tactically, they sought to ambush and encircle the Spanish, choosing ground that neutralized the effectiveness of cavalry. The Mapuche mastered the use of horses within a couple of generations of their first encounter, making them a highly mobile raiding force able to fight Spanish cavalry on equal terms. The Mapuche were also a decentralized society, banding together in times of war, but with no capital or political center vulnerable to attack. On the other side, the Spanish logistical system was consistently abysmal. Garrison troops went so far as to eat the leather ties that bound together their stockades, and bartered weapons with their enemies in return for food. (45)

Sharman contrasts the Mapuche adaptations with the stubborn refusal of the Spanish to learn from their enemies' tactics. Instead of adapting as the Military Revolution model assumes, they stuck to their old traditions and failed, a common occurrence according to Sharman.

The book's consideration of the Portuguese seaborne empire validates a later offshoot of the Military Revolution thesis—its stress on European naval architecture and superior seagoing warships. It does, however, note the limitations of sea power in dealing with powerful land-based states. On land, the Portuguese had no tactical or technological advantages over the Ottomans, Mughals, or Chinese; only the tolerance of local rulers allowed them to operate near or occupy ports on the Indian and Chinese coasts. Though the Portuguese won some naval conflicts in the Indian Ocean, they lost battles even to the smaller Sultanate of Oman along the East African coast and never made much of an impression on the Chinese. They did better in parts of the East Indies, where political structures were more fragmented and some islands and ports could be defended with European artillery fortresses. Even so, they controlled relatively little territory and struggled to secure their maritime trade against local and European competition.

The author then moves on to the Dutch and English East India Companies, which pushed the Portuguese out of the Indian Ocean and established their own commercial empires in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here again, he notes, Europeans fared better as traders than as conquerors, and lacked the resources to compete effectively with major land powers. Moreover, these companies were private and often acted contrary to the policies of their home governments. Neither fielded large armies of European soldiers and their activities had little to do with bureaucratization of their home states. Both benefited from political disunity in the East Indies and later in India, which enabled them to recruit local allies and play rival states off against one another. But the Dutch could not sustain their military or naval efforts for long and lost power and status in the region by the later seventeenth century. The British eventually gained power in India in the later eighteenth century partly by enlisting Indian soldiers (sepoys) trained to fight like Europeans. But it was nineteenth-century industrial Britain that actually conquered India.

Finally, Sharman turns to the Ottoman Turks, whose multinational empire (1299–1922/23) was long the greatest military power in Europe. He turns the Military Revolution model on its head, arguing that the Ottomans mastered gunpowder weapons as soon as the Europeans did, fielded larger armies, used them strategically on multiple fronts, and developed a bureaucratic state that capitalized on their vast resources of manpower and revenue as effectively as did their European rivals, whom they repeatedly defeated in the field. They came close to taking Vienna as late as 1683 and won major victories over the Austrians and Russians in the eighteenth century. The author notes that Mughal India, Ming and Manchu China, and even Safavid Iran were large military powers that succeeded as imperial states as long as or longer than any of their European opponents.

The author concludes by contextualizing European expansion in the nineteenth century, when technology and industrialization were deciding factors. The Europeans carved out substantial empires in Africa and parts of Asia, thanks for the most part to small, non-European armies rather than the insufficient resources of their bureaucratized home countries. But these victories were short-lived, enduring only as long as the locals accepted them, which became impossible after World War II. Multinational empires, seemingly a natural consequence of military modernization, were more a passing fad. Putting his political scientist hat back on, Sharman maintains that colonization and empire-building yielded a set of doggedly independent states in the wake of World War II and the Cold War. The European empires in the end served as stepping stones to something more permanent.

J.C. Sharman has produced a persuasive and corrective work of synthesis by interweaving material from specialized military histories in novel and perceptive ways. Even scholars conversant with his subject matter will find much food for thought here. Its lucid prose and concision will make *Empires of the Weak* accessible as well to a broader audience extending to undergraduate students of military history.