



How the Army Made Britain a Global Power: 1688–1815 by Jeremy Black.

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How the Army Made Britain a Global Power offers a panoramic reassessment of the British Army between the Glorious Revolution (1688–89) and the end of the Napoleonic Wars (1815). Author Jeremy Black challenges common beliefs and stereotypes regarding the Georgian army; these too often have a whiff of *Blackadder*¹ about them. He makes a quick march across the century, characterizing the first half of the eighteenth century as a time of “limited success in North America, effort without victory in the Caribbean, and marginality in India” (64). By the end of the century the British had become the paramount global empire. Black sees the Seven Years War (1756–63) as the watershed, strengthening Britain’s situation as military innovations and well financed support from home produced military successes in North America, India, and the Caribbean.

Black denies that the Royal Navy was more vital than the army to Britain’s global standing; he challenges as well the perception that the British army was inferior to its continental counterparts, particularly the Prussian army. Black maps the iterative relations between activities on the continent and those taking place around the globe, as well as between the Royal Navy and the land forces under British control as amphibious operations became an important element in British strategy. Unlike European armies, which fought in familiar conditions and enjoyed shorter supply lines, the British army was regularly dispatched to distant theaters of operation where the physical and human environments demanded strategic, tactical, and logistical adaptations.

While Black concedes that the British did not always successfully adapt, over time they became more responsive and consequently enjoyed greater success as the century progressed. Much of this was due to the British practice of subcontracting violence to willing allies and entrepreneurs, including the East India Company, thereby drawing on local knowledge and expertise. This would in turn strengthen Britain’s capacity to project power globally, a capacity all too often overlooked if we focus either on Europe or North America.

Black’s global outlook is most evident in chapter five, on warfare in North America, and six, on combat in India. He acknowledges that critical fiscal and administrative resources back-stopped British planning. In India, for example, the British displaced the French by treating India as part of rather than separate from their global strategy. They made the commitments needed to shore up their position in the face of European as well as Indian competition. The interplay between home and away, continent and colonies, produced a hybrid army bolstered by the diversity of its personnel, their cultures, and battlefield experiences. A case in point was Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, whose career started in Europe, but switched to India before his return to Europe. Napoleon allegedly denigrated him as the “Sepoy General.” Black shows that Wellington’s success in the Peninsula and at Waterloo did in fact reflect his Indian experience. In particular, he learned how to (a) mold an army from disparate allies, (b) ensure it was well supported through a responsive logistics system, and (c) combine well drilled infantry into lines prepared for volley fire

1. See *Wikipedia*, s.v., *Blackadder*.

and bayonet charges while light infantry skirmishers covered their advance. “Sepoy General” indeed!

Recruitment and management of a multicultural/multifaith army ensured British success. Tapping local reservoirs of cheap military labor and co-opting likely rivals allowed the British to deploy locally raised auxiliaries familiar with prevailing conditions. But there were risks. Black describes difficulties encountered in Indian campaigning in a contemporary account of the British struggle against Yusuf Khan (1763). What is however particularly noteworthy but not explored here is that Khan was not only an ambitious military leader but he was in effect a subcontractor recruited and promoted by the British. However, he later broke away when the East India Company tried to curb his authority and autonomy.

Black also credits colonial warfare with speeding up the professionalizing of the British army: officers of “great social positions did not tend to serve in distant and disease-ridden India unless they were true professionals” (30). India did in fact foster professionalism among some officers of the regular army as well as their East India Company counterparts. (The same was true of other forces deployed elsewhere around the globe.) But there was a more pedestrian and less noble incentive to serve in India in the mid-eighteenth century—the chance to make one’s fortune by “shaking the pagoda tree” [pagoda referred to a coin in circulation]. Moreover, as officers in the Company secured their appointments not through purchase but through patronage, it became an avenue for cash-strapped but ambitious figures. Personal gain and military success are not mutually exclusive: Robert Clive was both a skilled, self-taught commander and an avaricious man of dubious ethical standards. Nor was he unique: in 1776, several officers mounted a coup that toppled the governor of Madras, who died in confinement. While the Company reestablished its authority, the officers in question mostly went unpunished. But the potential for private fortunes was curtailed in the 1780s and ‘90s when officers were subjected to more oversight and control.

In one major respect, Black’s book follows the standard narrative wherein British society was marked by “a lack of a militarized culture, both generally and in politics” (xi). While this view carries some weight in the early 1800s, as the century wore on British society became more militarized, though not in the caricatured manner often associated with it. Ultimate civilian authority was never seriously threatened and Parliament closely controlled the army. But society did become more militarized, and politicians, particularly within the wider British empire, became increasingly associated with the military. The imagery of empire is saturated with military symbols and icons. Hence, what Black calls the “anti-military ethos of British politics” (xii) is easily overstated. It was no coincidence that, after the Napoleonic Wars, many of Wellington’s senior officers went on to colonial governorships.

A related issue bears more consideration here, given the stress on the British army being as much an imperial as a national force: the links between the army and the forging of British and colonial identities. This includes the gradually racialized experiences and understandings of the non-European soldiers so prominent in the nineteenth century and beyond.

It is the mark of a successful book that it triggers reflection and further questioning. The synthesis Jeremy Black offers in *How the Army Made Britain a Global Power* challenges hoary impressions of the British military while encouraging readers to dig more deeply into the origins, meanings, and consequences of Britain’s increasingly hybrid army.