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**Jamel Ostwald**, *Vauban under Siege: Engineering Efficiency and Martial Vigor in the War of Spanish Succession*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007. xiii + 390. Maps, figures, tables, appendices and index. \$159.00 (cl). ISBN 10-90-04-15489-2.

Review by Michael Wolfe, St. John's University.

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Sébastien le Prestre de Vauban looms as an almost iconic figure behind the advent of new, more rational and scientific forms of modern warfare in the West. Yet after reading Jamel Ostwald's brilliant new book, based on his original doctoral dissertation, historians will perforce need to fundamentally revise this longstanding thesis and reassess central aspects of the much vaunted Military Revolution. For years, there has been much talk about the "new military history", and while certainly the scope for the study of war has been widened to include cultural and social vantage points, few scholars have proposed such a thorough rethinking of basic military theories and practices as Ostwald does, all of which he explains in a series of fascinating appendices on his dataset methodology. Unlike previous historians, Ostwald resists the temptation to buy into the mythos of Vauban propagated in the marshal's memoirs, the celebrated *Oisivetés*, and by his eighteenth-century acolytes. Instead, he digs deeply and broadly into the archives in France, Great Britain, Belgium and the Netherlands to examine the actual practices of war during the purported heyday of Vauban's influence, the War of Spanish Succession, only to discover—as Vauban himself wistfully complained about more than once—that few generals ever actually implemented what he so fervently advocated when it came to siege warfare.

Ostwald situates his study in the vast historiography on the Military Revolution and the rise of the fiscal-military state in chapter one. He builds principally on the revisionary work of his mentor, John Lynn, under whom he studied at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Lynn has stressed the importance of the Bourbon state's growing administrative capacity to mobilize and deploy resources, primarily in the form of ever larger armies, during Louis XIV's reign.[1] Ostwald juxtaposes two competing models of warfare vying for dominance under Louis XIV. The first emerged from the world of the engineers, reaching its apex in the work of Vauban. It predicated the pursuit of war on achieving maximal efficiency in terms of resource use to achieve the state's objectives. It set a premium on planning and prudence. The second approach to war was the way of the generals. It emphasized what Ostwald terms "martial vigor", which sought to bring maximal force to bear to achieve results in as little time as possible. It emphasized speed and mobility. His analysis examines the ensuing dialectic between the two approaches.

While much of Ostwald's analysis concerns the tactics of siege warfare, at root the crux of his argument turns on logistics and the growing capacity of fiscal-military states to wage longer, more destructive wars. The history of warfare has oscillated in the relative balance between not only offense and defense, but also methodical versus headlong approaches to war. The advent of gunpowder weaponry in the late

Middle Ages prompted a shift in fortification design with the rise and subsequent development of the bastioned *trace italienne*. Its success ushered in a period of defensive predominance that lasted into the seventeenth century. Conventional explanations attribute the decline of siege warfare to Vauban's vaunted systems of attack, which in theory rendered all fortified places ultimately indefensible. Yet as Ostwald demonstrates, it was not Vauban's new efficient methods of attack that gave a decided advantage to besiegers, but rather the brute growth in artillery production and its increased mobility which enabled military commanders to blast their way into just about any redoubt. This latter approach became associated with Menno van Coehoorn, a much understudied contemporary of Vauban. One of the many virtues of Ostwald's book is to reclaim the significance of this highly influential Dutch military engineer.

The next two chapters establish the Vauban paradigm of efficiency and the "perfect" siege. Chapter two offers a detailed analysis of the 1697 siege of Ath, which Ostwald convincingly argues best exemplified the main principles of a Vauban-style siege with its reliance on trench parallels and the new technique of ricochet fire. Chapter three sets the broader context of the engineers' pursuit of efficiency, focusing more deeply on the developing rationales behind Vauban's systematic approach to siege warfare. Avoiding unnecessary costs and reducing casualties drove Vauban's thinking on the ideal planning and prosecution of a siege, a subject which he elaborated upon in memoranda to the king and, eventually, published guidebooks. Vauban aspired not for a cookie-cutter system of siege warfare, but rather a systematic, rationally-based mode of determining how best to resolve the particular defensive or offensive challenges posed by each fortified place. Experience combined with proper training formed the key to effective, efficient military engineering. In reviewing treatises and manuals, Ostwald shows that Vauban represented the culmination of, not a departure from prior military engineering practices and metrics that stretched back to the Renaissance. What set Vauban apart from earlier military engineers were not his ideas so much as the unprecedented power and resources put at his disposal—for a time—by Louis XIV.

The remainder of the book shifts attention to the changing ways of war during the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1714). Ostwald sees this vast, complex conflict as a time of transition, as he explains in chapter four. While sieges took place in abundance, they did not proceed according to Vauban's system. Vauban's greatest influence was in the area of defense, in the concentric rings of fortresses that composed the celebrated *pré carré*. This defense-in-depth stopped the Allied advances when France's field armies could not. Territorial gains on both sides, in fact, depended much on the condition of the fortifications in a given area of the Low Countries, the principal theater of operations. Military engineers, including the aged Vauban, played a decidedly declining role in military affairs on both sides as the generals, led by figures such as the Duke of Marlborough, opted for "vigor" over "efficiency."

Chapter five, "Implementing the Paradigm Siege," chronicles the yawning divide between Vauban's theoretical propositions as expressed on paper and their actual implementation in siege warfare. Time and again as sieges occurred, efficiency gave way to expediency, the careful advice and calculations of engineers assiduously ignored by commanders. In part, this disjunction between theory and reality stemmed from the army's organization into discrete service branches, infantry, cavalry, artillery, and—finally and most marginalized of all—engineers. The ensuing controversies saw general officers and engineers trading charges of incompetence

and inefficiency against each other with rising frequency as the war went on, with the general officers steadily gaining the day, especially following Vauban's death in 1707. Chapter six, "Contesting the Paradigm Siege," details how commanders disregarded and criticized the engineers. While engineers provided convenient scapegoats to account for military failures, Ostwald makes a good case that the overall professional caliber of engineers declined as experienced ones died or became disabled.

The rejection of Vauban's own principles and practices paved the way for a speedier, but also decidedly bloodier way to conduct sieges through the use of massive artillery bombardments and infantry assaults. This forms the subject of the last chapters of the book on "vigor", which provided an alternative paradigm for the conduct of war by the more robust fiscal-military states of the early eighteenth century. General officers saw unacceptable risks in the engineers' obsession with cautious, time-consuming efficiency. From their perspective, as Ostwald clearly explains in chapter seven, speed was of the essence because of the inherent, multiple difficulties of bringing together and sustaining over time a larger fighting force. Seasonal and logistical factors, in particular, loomed large in their calculation to accept the higher casualties entailed in efforts to quickly overwhelm the enemy. Time mattered more than lives. This shift in thinking also explains why pitched field battles became so attractive as alternatives to grinding sieges, especially among Allied commanders. And, as Ostwald demonstrates in chapter eight, the use of brute force, primarily in the form of massed artillery, brought frequent success to those who initiated the attack. Indeed, as he explains in the concluding chapter, the roots of the modern premium placed on mobility and firepower, seen later in the carnage of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars and the ensuing rise of total war, go back to the War of Spanish Succession.[2] The dialectic driving the shape of modern war was decidedly not Vaubanian.

Jamel Ostwald has set a new standard for the writing of military history. He proposes revisionist readings of time-worn truisms about the directions and development of early modern warfare, all based upon a thorough and intelligent analysis of pertinent archival sources. While not denying the predominance of an offensive mentality in modern warfare, the days of resolving conflicts by overwhelming force in terms of personnel and technology—the vaunted "shock and awe" of recent American campaigns in the Middle East—may be coming to an end in what specialists now call the new modalities of "asymmetrical" war, itself a practice addressed as far back as Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. [3] The planning and prudence so touted by Vauban, so brazenly ignored by most politicians and generals alike since his day, may yet find new advocates in light of recent failures of "martial vigor."

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## NOTES

[1] John Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle: The French Army, 1610-1715*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[2] See, in particular, the new book by David A. Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).

[3] Sun Tzu lived in the state of Wu from 544 to 496 BCE. On the subject of modern asymmetrical war, consult the almost prophetic work of Martin Van Creveld,

including his recent *The Changing Face of War: Lessons of Combat, from the Marne to Iraq*, (New York: Presidio Press, 2006).

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