



## ***THE EXPERIENCE OF CIVILIAN POPULATIONS DURING THE HUNDRED YEARS WAR IN FRANCE c. 1340-c.1440***

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*But if on both sides war is decided upon and begun by the Councils of the two kings (of England and France), the soldiery may take spoil from the kingdom at will, and make war freely; and if sometimes the humble and innocent will suffer harm and lose their goods, it cannot be otherwise; ... Valiant men and wise, however, who follow arms should take pains, so far as they can, not to bear hard on the simple and innocent folk but only on those who make and continue war and flee peace.’ (Honoré Bouvet, *The Tree of Battles*, Part Four, ch. 48)<sup>1</sup>*

This statement in a French vernacular law book, written in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century and dedicated to the young King Charles VI of France sums up the problem of how to be a responsible warrior. A generation later, a court poet envisaged that ‘*Great She-Devil War*’, ‘*goddess of the infernal regions*’ who brings nothing but pain and destruction to the poor inhabitants of the kingdom.<sup>2</sup> He was not the first to identify how ravaged was France by the intermittent but long-lasting series of conflicts known since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century as the Hundred Years War. Jean de Venette, a Carmelite Friar and senior member of that Order wrote feelingly about the disorder in France following the defeat and capture of King John at the battle of Poitiers in 1356.

*‘From that time on all went ill with the kingdom and the state was undone. Thieves and robbers rose up everywhere in the land. The nobles despised and hated all others and took no thought for the mutual usefulness and profit of lord and men. They subjected and despoiled the peasantry and the men of the villages. In no way did they defend their country from its enemies. Rather they did trample it under foot, robbing and pillaging the peasants’ goods.’<sup>3</sup>*

It was hardly surprising that within a couple of years there began a series of peasant rebellions known as the Jacquerie. These were named after the archetypal French peasant Jacques Bonhomme; but that should not hide the fact that many people of gentry class and town dwellers found themselves equally at odds with their supposed social betters in the seigneurie.

*‘In the same year of 1356, the citizens of Paris, fearing the enemy and putting little trust in the nobility, placed iron chains across the streets and crossroads of their city. They dug a ditch around the walls in the west and the suburbs in the east where no walls had been before, and they built new walls with gates and towers ... They fortified the towers with giant crossbows, cannons, and other artillery. They destroyed all the houses which adjoined the*

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1 Coopland, p.154

2 Pierre de Nesson, *Lay de Guerre*, written c.1429, cited by Wright p. 71.

3 Trans. R. Birdsall, ed. R, Newhall p. 66.



*wall and splendid dwellings both inside and out were completely demolished... I myself saw (all this happening)'.<sup>4</sup>*

This eyewitness testimony is again that of Jean de Venette. Also, when later the Parisians fell out with Charles, Duke of Normandy, acting as regent for his captive father, they found themselves besieged by their own countrymen as:

*'In all the country round about, misfortunes and losses due to certain nobles and freebooters were increasing more and more. Foulques de Laval with many Bretons plundered the Beauce and set fire to many villages. He pillaged Etampes, which had already been taken and burned once by freebooters like him, for the second time. The robbers came as far as Orleans and beyond, so that no one dare take the road between the two places. Neither was the road to Compiègne or anywhere else safe or secure.'<sup>5</sup>*

*'Losses and injuries were inflicted by friend and foe alike upon the rural population and upon monasteries standing in the open country. Everyone robbed them of their goods and there was no one to defend them. For this reason many men and women, both secular and religious were compelled on all sides to leave their abode and seek out the city ... there was not a monastery in the neighbourhood of Paris, however near, that was not driven by fear of freebooters to enter the city or some other fortification, abandoning their buildings and, 'Woe is me!' leaving the divine offices unsung. This tribulation increased in volume, not only around Paris but also in the neighbourhood of Orléans, Tours, Nantes in Brittany, Chartres, and Le Mans, in an amazing way. Villages were burned and their population plundered. Men hastened to the cities with their carts and their goods, their wives and their children, in lamentable fashion.'<sup>6</sup>*

There is much here that is familiar to modern student of 'total war': the supportive structures of Church and State have collapsed; trade has been stifled; what would now be called Internally Displaced People roam the land and flood towards the apparent protection of towns; civil war and brigandage is rampant in the ensuing chaos; and even the quotidian comforts of communal religious services have been lost amidst the confusion, adding to a sense of moral collapse and loss of confidence in the social order. This situation goes to show just how vulnerable was medieval society to the disorder that warfare often brings in its train. So this begs the question just how common was this state of affairs, whether there was anything distinctive about the nature of warfare half-a-millennium ago, and whether there are any lessons that might be learnt from it today.

First there is the important assumption that a particular group in the society – the nobles – had a unique responsibility for the maintenance of order through force of arms. In theory, only those under the leadership of a legitimate ruler, the prince, had the right to conduct military activity on account of their status. So, if it became apparent that they were failing in their duties, then everything was cast into doubt about the validity of the social structure. Certainly, according to tracts such as the Tree of Battles, or the later work of Christine de Pisan, a noblewoman and prolific authoress writing at the Burgundian court in the first decades of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, warriors had an obligation to behave well towards others

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4 Ibid. p. 67.

5 Ibid. p. 73.

6 Ibid. p. 75.



according to set of categories. Other nobles they were required to capture rather than to kill and treat well in captivity until a sufficient ransom had been raised to assure the prisoner's liberty. This situation was the same for anyone with even the lowest title of rank right up to the king himself, as in the case of King John mentioned earlier. In addition, both military custom and Canon Law required that vulnerable members of society should not be brutalised or exploited. Such protections had grown out of the Peace and Truce of God movement (which prefigured the Crusades) in the way that some bishops in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century and the popes during the 11<sup>th</sup> century 'revolution' in papal government attempted to control and redirect the violence of the warrior classes. In the words of a recent article entitled 'Collateral Damage?':

*'In the late Middle Ages, Honoré Bonet, dispensed with Truce but upheld prohibitions against imprisoning or ransoming a wide range of non-combatants, including old men, women, children, clergy, pilgrims and peasants. In this way the Peace of God helped to establish some of the intellectual foundations for the concept of collateral damage: a distinction between soldier and civilian, and the corresponding idea of the natural immunity of non-combatants and their possessions.'*<sup>7</sup>

Such regulation was understood at the time as the Laws of War. Operating outside them could leave a transgressor subject to punishment, not just by the opinion of peers but under the jurisdiction of the state through the royal law courts. Those convicted of such behaviour could face a series of penalties ranging from compensation to victims, to sequestration of landed estates and property, up to public execution. So, in theory at least, there were compelling reasons for soldiers to behave well in respect of these regulations. As is clear from Jean de Venette's reports, though, they could be hard to enforce.

The most characteristic form of warfare during the period in question was that of the *chevauchée*, literally a ride through enemy territory with the intention of demonstrating to the hapless population that their own lords could not protect them. Although it might involve or terminate in a battle, this was not the prime requisite for such a campaign. Rather the intent was to inflict damage along the route of march involving not just the usual impact of a hungry, marching army, but also the deliberate acquisition of cattle, destruction of fields, orchards and vines, and of property and economic infrastructure. When Henry V, King of England is reported to have said: *'War without fire is like andouillettes (tripe sausages) without mustard'*, he was merely mouthing a commonplace.<sup>8</sup>

Hewitt's famous study of the Black Prince's Expedition of 1355-1357 in Gascony and Poitou, encapsulates this medieval military operation:

*'Armies fight and 'live on the land'; armies may be allowed or encouraged to plunder; they must also be used to destroy the means of living. Destruction, therefore, of habitations and of the means by which life is maintained becomes an important part of a chevauchée. While modern strategy consists in cutting off supplies at source, destroying them in bulk, or disrupting their transport, medieval leaders were obliged to destroy them 'on the spot'.*

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7 Hay, p.12.

8 Quoted by Wright from the *Chronicle of Juvenal d'Ursins*. Henry was also renowned for his Ordinances, which restricted the ravaging of his men.



*Once the work of destruction is started, it may go further than strict military needs require. If a town has been besieged and resisted its attackers for some time, its ultimate capture may be followed by a combination of butchery, plunder and destruction which is irrational but intelligible. On occasion, undefended villages may suffer the same fate. And, at a time when timber forms so large a part of almost all buildings, the most useful means of destruction is fire. It makes no demands on transport, requires no muscular effort and is all-consuming.'*<sup>9</sup>

Edward III's *chevauchée* through the Cambresis in 1339 was so devastating as to be worthy of a papal enquiry and aid mission to the region. It has been estimated by Clifford Rogers that armies were capable of a band of devastation some 40 km wide along their line of march. Using this calculation he suggests that the Black Prince's 1355 *chevauchée* from Bordeaux almost to the Mediterranean may have been responsible for the destruction of 18,000 square kilometres of territory in addition to the specific pillaging and burning of a dozen or so enemy towns. When devastation was a normal tool of commanders it was easy to see how the civilian population was likely to suffer.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, the exactions of several thousand soldiers, the equivalent of a population of a contemporary city, were bound to put a huge drain on the lands through which they passed, before they tended to any deliberate destruction. But stationery garrisons also placed a huge demand upon their surrounding territories. The cost of maintaining troops of cavalry and their specialist auxiliaries such as crossbowmen was high both in terms of pay and sustenance. Contested frontiers placed an additional pressure upon the inhabitants of the disputed territory, as they often had to pay tribute to both sides. Given the often insecure nature of royal finances in both England and France (Edward III actually went bankrupt in 1341 and defaulted on his debts to the Italian banks, bringing a number of them down), such exactions were legitimised under the title of the *appatis*. The studies of Maurice Keen and, more recently, Nigel Wright explore the implications of this burdensome system for local communities. Wright uses the term '*borrowed lordship*' to explain how local rulers of expedience, soldiers or mercenaries placed in a position of authority by the exigencies of warfare, could effectively milk a territory dry by their exactions. In the case of mercenaries, of course, if they were paid - and this was not certain - it was only in wartime. During times of truce (all that was recognized throughout the era, peace being often a step too far), mercenaries had to fend for themselves. So it was that bands of them, known as the Free Companies, terrorised large areas of France from the 1350s onwards, causing more damage than even the formal and legitimate military operations sanctioned by the princes.

Just as an aside, although mercenaries have a terrible reputation today and indeed are condemned by the Geneva Conventions, this should not leave us with anachronistic belief that all mercenary troops, at all times, are always a scourge. Under the *ancien régime*, mercenaries often formed the reliable core of royal forces and indeed when the French kings and Burgundian dukes formed their *Compagnies d'Ordnance* in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century these were the origin of regular armies in Western Europe. The problem then was not mercenaries *per se*, but unpaid mercenaries. Many of them rightly acquired the title of *échorcheurs* (flayers) in the ways that conducted themselves whilst seeking sustenance or grabbing power. Their '*borrowed lordship*' was all the more exploitative because of its uncertain basis.

<sup>9</sup> Hewett, p. 46

<sup>10</sup> Wright citing Rogers 'By Fire and Sword' p. 69 fn. 34. This actual number may be too large but it powerfully evokes the potential impact of *chevauchée*.



So, is it then impossible to find any proper regulation of warfare in the pre-modern (pre-1500) period? I would answer 'No'. While it is true that long-running wars destroyed social cohesion and allowed soldiers to bully local populations, in times of relative peace, the royal law courts could resume their activities and notable scoundrels were punished.

*'The count of Armagnac wanted the service of Mériqot Marchés on his planned crusade, 1390, not only to rid the Auvergne of an appalling freebooter, but also because "in all deeds of arms he knew Marchés to be skilled and subtle in taking by assault of towns and able to advise in all matters of war that one might need".'*<sup>11</sup>

Yet only a year later this *routier* was tried for treason by royal judges after he fell into French hands. Marchés protested he was in English service, had three times been ransomed by them, and that he had: *'done all those things which a man can and ought to do in a just war, as taking Frenchmen and putting them to ransom, living on the country and despoiling it, and leading the company under his command about the realm of France, and burning and firing places in it.'*<sup>12</sup>

Despite this defence he was found guilty and publicly decapitated in Les Halles.

So, in some ways, the situation was perhaps not very different from today, where we await the prosecution of 'war criminals' from the former-Yugoslavian conflicts of the 1990s. The concept of Just War I have not touched on for reasons of time and it might be a topic to return to in the discussion following this session; but I hope that what I have said will help in forming a wider understanding of how civilians fare in times of war.<sup>13</sup>

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11 Wright p. 53, citing Froissart,

12 Keen, p. 98 quoting Marchés' deposition.

13 The issue of Just War is explored in my presentation at a conference entitled: 'Crossing the Divide: Continuity and Change in Medieval and Early Modern Warfare' held at the University of Reading, Great Britain, 11-12 September 2007 to be published as: 'In what circumstances was war legitimate and what was permissible in its conduct?', in [European Warfare 1350-1750](#) eds. F. Tallett & D.J.B. Trim (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming, 2009).



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