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INTERESTS, CORRUPTION AND MILITARY
EFFECTIVENESS: THE FRENCH ARMY OF ITALY
AND THE CAMPAIGN OF 1657*

Challenging the traditional argument that the French army in the 1650s was marked by significant developments in centralized administrative control, this article looks at the continuing importance of the interplay of three interest groups in determining the effectiveness of military operations: central government; the generals and their military administrators; the regimental officers. It argues that in the Italian theatre these three interest groups proved unable to work together, and explores the consequences of this for strategy and military outcomes.

Corruption in the army, decentralisation, interest groups, military effectiveness, seventeenth-century France and Italy

Smentendo l'interpretazione tradizionale, secondo la quale negli anni Cinquanta del Seicento si sarebbe verificato in seno all'esercito francese un significativo processo di marcato accentramento amministrativo, l'articolo mette in luce la persistente influenza sull'efficacia delle operazioni militari esercitata dall'interazione fra tre fondamentali gruppi di interesse: il governo centrale, i generali e i loro collaboratori, gli ufficiali dei reggimenti. Si dimostra che nel teatro italiano essi si rivelarono incapaci di lavorare insieme in modo efficace, analizzando le conseguenze di questa mancata collaborazione sul piano strategico e degli esiti bellici.

Corruzione nell'esercito, decentramento, gruppi di interesse, efficacia militare, Francia e Italia nel XVII secolo

Like most other aspects of French politics and government following the end of the *Fronde*s in 1653, the administration of the army has received little attention from historians. Overshadowed by Louis

* The author wishes to thank the Leverhulme Trust for their award of a Major Research Fellowship from 2013-2016 for a project to study French politics in the 1650's. Research conducted as part of that project has contributed significantly to the present article.

XIV's assumption of personal rule in 1661 and the long subsequent reign of the Sun King, the few intervening years seem marginal and unimportant. The last book to give detailed attention to the French army during this period was the 1906 study by Louis André, *Michel le Tellier et l'organisation de l'armée monarchique*. André's thesis presented the war minister, Michel le Tellier, securely re-established in power after 1653, pursuing a series of army reforms that «he had long intended to undertake»¹. These reforming initiatives paved the way for the administrative transformation of the army that was to be accomplished by Le Tellier and his son, the marquis de Louvois, in the decades after 1661.

The picture offered by André and largely accepted by subsequent historians provides a traditional top-down view of institutional effectiveness. Reforms would establish greater authority for the ministers and their agents, whether over command and control within the armies, recruitment and maintenance of troops, the oversight of supply operations, or soldiers' welfare and discipline. Conversely, the autonomy of the officers and their control over soldiers, support systems and field administrators needed to be eroded and ultimately eliminated.

André's case for a reforming war ministry after 1653 is overwhelmingly based on the citation of *ordonnances*, *règlements*, and other formal legislative material. The account is naturally one of an active and interventionist centre, seeking to identify problems and to control and regulate all aspects of military activity. Such an approach has some merit: the range and sheer volume of legislation can certainly tell the historian something of the aspirations of government to intervene in administration. But in the main such legislation must be understood as a declaration of intent, not evidence for success in the practical transformation of an institution. A very different perspective is gained if the focus is shifted from formal legislation to the exchange of correspondence between the central government and the armies, and between military officers and administrators, concerning the practical, day-to-day problems of managing an army in the field².

Such correspondence makes clear that the establishment and op-

¹ L. ANDRÉ, *Michel le Tellier et l'organisation de l'armée monarchique*, Paris 1906, p. 112.

² This reciprocal correspondence is preserved in the Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères, series Correspondance Politique, a richer source for the period before 1661 than the archives of the Service historique de la défense, from which the various military *règlements* and *ordonnances* are primarily drawn.

erations of the seventeenth-century French army are better seen in terms of an elaborate balancing of interests, negotiated between the central government – whether crown, ministers or directly accountable ministerial agents – and the generals, regimental officers and embedded administrators with the army. Certainly the ministers and their agents might aspire to exercise control over strategic decision-making, to establish the size and shape of the army, to oversee discipline and to exact accountability. But these aspirations needed to be matched by the central government's readiness to accept reciprocal obligations towards the army officers. These might include the provision of adequate pay for the army, the organization and direct financing of supply contracting, or ensuring that commitments to maintain the size of the army were met.

The principal factor determining these relationships between ministerial “centre” and military “periphery” was the simple fact that states in the first half of the seventeenth century were incapable of meeting their financial and organizational obligations to their armies³. If armies were to survive and achieve operational objectives they needed to draw a proportion of their support directly from the serving officers. In many situations, officers were prepared to accept a part of the financial and organizational burden of recruiting, clothing and equipping soldiers for their regiments or companies; governors of fortified places often paid a high proportion of the costs of maintaining their garrisons, together with expenses related to fortifications and the stockpiling of supplies. It was no less the case that the crown and its ministers assumed that provincial governors and aristocratic generals would meet some of the expenses of a campaign theatre where they had been appointed to command⁴. Other expenses were short-term and unpredictable. These might include making good shortfalls from central administration for soldiers' basic pay, bread supplies, or munitions in mid-campaign. Siege works were another area of unpredictable expense, requiring extra money to hire pioneers, or to

³ This is a huge subject which cannot be discussed in this article, but see for example, I.A.A. THOMPSON, *War and Government in Habsburg Spain, 1560-1620*, London 1976; *Mobilizing Resources for War: Britain and Spain at Work during the Early Modern Period*, edited by H. Bowen and A. González-Enciso, Pamplona 2006; D. PARROTT, *The Business of War. Military Enterprise and Military Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge 2012; *War, Entrepreneurs and the State in Europe and the Mediterranean, 1300-1800*, edited by J. Fynn-Paul, Leiden 2014.

⁴ D. PARROTT, *Richelieu's Army. War, Government and Society in France, 1624-42*, Cambridge 2001, pp. 336-352.

bribe line soldiers to dig siege works and take part in dangerous operations. The expectation that officers, and to some extent agents such as commissioners, *intendants* and ambassadors, would use their cash and credit to meet some of these expenses was embedded in collective military-administrative assumptions.

However there was a reciprocal aspect to these assumptions: insofar as the generals, governors and line officers had committed their own resources to the military operations, this implied, certainly in their opinion, that they had rights and interests in the organization and running of the army, a role that the central government needed to recognize and take into account in its own decision-making. What this meant in practice can be demonstrated by pointing to an army in which the balance of interests lay overwhelmingly with the officers. The French army of Germany, when it had campaigned in the 1640s, was dominated by an officer-corps who had recruited, equipped and supported their regiments at their own expense, and exercised direct control over their troops, effectively serving the French crown under contract. Though overall command of the army was in the hands of French generals like Guébriant, Longueville and Turenne, the majority of the regimental colonels were German, and could be accurately described as military enterprisers or colonel-proprietors⁵. Many had served as military contractors in the army of Duke Bernhard of Saxe-Weimar up to his death in 1639, and as “Weimarians” continued to intervene as shareholders in the army’s decision-making processes. The French government acquiesced in the army’s high level of autonomy, above all because for long periods it was not merely militarily successful but virtually self-financing, extracting war-taxes or ‘contributions’ from territory that it occupied or threatened in the Holy Roman Empire⁶. Indeed, Mazarin congratulated Turenne in late 1648 for having sustained the army in Germany for almost the entire campaign without demanding any funding from the royal treasury⁷. Conversely,

⁵ A.M.R.A. DE NOAILLES, *Le maréchal de Guébriant, 1602-1643*, Paris 1913, pp. 140-142; A. VON GONZENBACH, *Der General Hans Ludwig von Erlach von Castlelan*, 3 vols, Berne 1880-82.

⁶ D. CROXTON, *Peacemaking in Early Modern Europe. Cardinal Mazarin and the Congress of Westphalia, 1643-48*, Selinsgrove (PA) 1999, pp. 72-94, 196-255; E. GYLLENSTIERNA, *Henri de Turenne et Charles Gustave Wrangel. Stratégie et tactique pendant les dernières années de la Guerre de Trente Ans*, in *Turenne et l'art militaire: Actes du Colloque International*, Paris 1978, pp. 201-206.

⁷ J. MAZARIN, *Lettres du Cardinal Mazarin pendant son ministère*, edited by A. Chéruel and D.L.M. Avenel, 9 vols, Paris 1872-1906, II, p. 234, 6 November 1648.

attempts to impose central direction on the strategic priorities and operations of the army were extremely risky when these clashed with the interests of the officers. In summer 1647 Mazarin's ill-judged order to Turenne to redeploy the Army of Germany into Luxembourg and Flanders had provoked a mutiny by eleven of the German regiments, most of which defected to the service of Sweden⁸.

The army of Germany was demonstrably successful as a military instrument precisely because of its unambiguous reliance on the credit and organizational commitment of its officers, and its virtual operational autonomy⁹. However, the majority of the individual armies established and deployed by the French crown after the declaration of war on Spain in 1635 were more complex in their aggregations of different interests. An outstanding example of these complexities and their potentially volatile interactions is provided by the French forces in North Italy. A single campaign, such as that chosen here, 1657, can provide detailed insight into this interplay of interests and expectations within the army, and can show how it impacted on military performance and effectiveness¹⁰.

The challenges of campaigning in North Italy

Although five years after the end of the *Frondes* and near to the very end of the twenty-five year war with Spain, the 1657 campaign was shaped by a legacy of particular difficulties that had beset the Italian theatre since the outbreak of hostilities in 1635. Despite the reformist case made by Louis André, there is no evidence that these difficulties were being resolved by central government intervention in the years following 1653.

From the outset of the great conflict with Spain in 1635, both Cardinal Richelieu and then his successor Mazarin made an explicit com-

⁸ H. DE LA TOUR D'AUVERGNE, VICOMTE DE TURENNE, *Mémoires écrits par lui-même*, 2 vols, Paris 1909, I, pp. 102-114, 312-322; P. SONNINO, *Mazarin's Quest. The Congress of Westphalia and the Coming of the Fronde*, Cambridge (MA) 2008, pp. 132-133.

⁹ PARROTT, *The Business of War*, pp. 139-195.

¹⁰ For a more detailed account of the campaigning, see: D. MAFFI, *Il baluardo della corona. Guerra, esercito, società e finanze nella Lombardia seicentesca (1635-1660)*, Firenze 2007, pp. 9-66; also G. HANLON, *The Twilight of a Military Tradition. Italian Aristocrats and European Conflicts, 1560-1800*, London 1998, pp. 122-134.

mitment to waging a substantial, offensive war in Italy. For both ministers, Italy was still the *coeur du monde*, the political, economic and cultural centre of the European state-system; military or political success there carried great prestige. At the same time both recognized that it was the vital resource-base and the strategic centre for the Spanish military system in Europe, the point at which disruption would be most effective¹¹. Richelieu's earlier intervention, in 1629-30 to support the dynastic claims of Charles de Nevers to the Gonzaga duchies of Mantua and Monferrato, had been a political triumph for France: Nevers's rights were upheld, and France gained control of the key fortresses of Casale-Monferrato from Mantua and Pinerolo from the Duke of Savoy, providing crucial support for any subsequent French descent into Italy¹².

The decision to campaign in Northern Italy had considerable consequences for the administration and management of the army. At the root of the difficulties were geopolitical factors largely outside of the control of any administration, and very different, for example, from those involved in supplying and maintaining an army on the north-eastern frontier with the Spanish Netherlands. Providing food, munitions and military hardware from within France to meet the needs of a transalpine army was difficult, slow and expensive: it involved moving goods and supplies to frontier regions that were far distant from French centres of production and poorly served by rivers and waterways, then ferrying them across the Alps and down into Piedmont¹³.

From the beginning of the war, therefore, the ministers recognized that provisioning the armies exclusively from France was not viable, and that a high proportion of food and munitions would need to be

¹¹ S. EXTERNBRINK, *Le Coeur du monde. Frankreich und die norditalienischen Staaten (Mantua, Parma, Savoyen) im Zeitalter Richelieus 1624-1635*, Münster 1999; A. BLUM, *La diplomatie de la France en Italie du nord au temps de Richelieu et de Mazarin*, Paris 2014; *De Paris à Turin. Christine de France Duchesse de Savoie*, edited by G. Ferretti, Paris 2014; G. DETHAN, *La politique italienne de Mazarin*, in *La France et l'Italie au temps de Mazarin*, edited by J. Serroy, Grenoble 1986, pp. 27-32.

¹² J.H. ELLIOTT, *Richelieu and Olivares*, Cambridge 1984, pp. 86-112; EXTERNBRINK, *Le Coeur du monde*, pp. 133-201.

¹³ G. ROWLANDS, *Moving Mars: the logistical geography of Louis XIV's France*, «French History», 25 (2011), pp. 492-514. For some of these difficulties in 1630 see A.J. DU PLESSIS, CARDINAL DE RICHELIEU, *Les Papiers de Richelieu*, edited by P. Grillon, 6 vols, Paris 1975-1985, V, pp. 393, 453-454 and 481, Michel de Marillac to Richelieu, 13 July, 30 July and 3 August 1630.

obtained from the Italian territories in which the army was operating. Here, France's alliance with the Duchy of Savoy-Piedmont from 1635 might seem a key logistical advantage. Piedmont was a fertile, densely-populated and wealthy territory, an apparently ideal base from which to support French military operations against Spanish Milan and her allies. The problem however lay precisely in the alliance: both Richelieu and Mazarin presented France's intervention in Italy, not as a product of military opportunism and territorial aggression, but as the action of a disinterested power seeking to form alliances with Italian princes to liberate or protect them from the "tyranny" of Spanish imperial domination. Most Italian rulers were justly suspicious of what France's real intentions might be, and looked to the treatment of Savoy-Piedmont as a crucial test of France's commitment to princely liberties¹⁴.

The practical consequence of this was that the army could not be seen to treat Piedmont in the way, for example, that the French army of Germany treated Swabia or Franconia during the 1640s: as a resource-base to be exploited directly and ruthlessly by the officers and administrators for the support and financing of the army. The sensitivities of the Court at Turin and its local representatives needed to be respected. Contracts for the supply of bread rations to the French troops were negotiated expensively and often clumsily between French central contractors and grain suppliers, millers, bakers and transport operatives within Piedmont. Piedmontese troops, artillery and munitions had to be bargained for rather than requisitioned, and often in the face of bitter opposition from the Savoyard authorities who claimed that these were needed for defensive purposes¹⁵.

Above all, the Court of Savoy was adamant that French troops should not be billeted in Piedmont over the winter months between campaigns. Experience in the late 1630's and early 1640's of the devastation that badly-controlled French soldiers could wreak had made the evacuation of Piedmont every autumn a public test of France's commitment to the territorial rights and integrity of her ally. This re-

¹⁴ BLUM, *La Diplomatie*, pp. 44-59; G. FERRETTI, *La politique italienne de la France et le duché de Savoie au temps de Richelieu*, «XVII^e Siècle», 262 (2014), pp. 7-20; ID., *La France et la Savoie à la conférence de Grenoble (1639)*, in *De Paris à Turin*, pp. 59-86.

¹⁵ For example, ARCHIVES DU MINISTÈRE DES AFFAIRES ÉTRANGÈRES, *Correspondance Politique*, Sardaigne (henceforth AAE, CPS), vol. 46, fol. 99, Servien (to Mazarin?), 12 April 1653; *ibid.*, vol. 48, fol. 111, Duchess Christina to Mazarin, 16 February 1654, concerning Piedmontese troop levies.

quirement, though understandable, was a fatal impediment to military effectiveness. At various points in the 1650's the French ministers and generals came near to breaking this agreement, but in the event Mazarin and the Court backed down in the face of the diplomatic consequences of forcing the issue¹⁶.

The complex diplomatic relationship with Savoy-Piedmont lay at the root of many of the other problems related to supplying the army in Italy. A typical supply contract for the provision of bread rations for the field army in Italy cost around 42 *déniers* per ration as against a usual 24 *déniers* on the north-eastern frontier of France¹⁷. The extra cost in itself would have been problematic, but the complexities of negotiating food, munitions and other contracts through Italian intermediaries added substantially to the problems of oversight and enforcement of the contracts. Partly because of the uncertainties of supply and pay, Italy was a notoriously unpopular destination for French soldiers¹⁸. This resistance to serving in Italy inevitably involved heavier expenses, either paying soldiers a higher enlistment bonus for Italian service, or being forced to recruit above the numbers of troops that were required in order to allow for the levels of wastage. Most regiments were under strength even before they crossed the Alps: military commissioners in Dauphiné and Provence turned a blind eye to regiments *en route* that were mustered at 25% of full strength or less¹⁹. The armies operating in Italy were thus frequently small, even though the pre-campaign allocations of troops by the central government were comparable or larger than those made to other theatres. Moreover the logistical problems of moving troops back across the Alps almost inevitably delayed the start of French campaigning, which would begin weeks, even months, after the opening of fighting in the theatres north of the Alps. It gave the Spanish army of Italy, operating directly out of their power-base in the Milanese, a substantial opening advantage year after year²⁰.

¹⁶ The ministers seemed prepared to force the issue in the winter of 1653-54: AAE, CPS, vol. 46, fol. 8-15, 7 January 1654, *et seq.* However by 21 February they had backed down and agreed to withdraw all but a token force of troops from Piedmont (fol. 117).

¹⁷ *Michel Le Tellier: son administration comme intendant d'armée en Piémont, 1640-43*, edited by N.L. Caron, Paris 1880, p. 50, De Noyers to Le Tellier, 12 March 1641; AAE, CPS, vol. 46, fol. 99, Ennemond Servien to Mazarin, 12 April 1653.

¹⁸ PARROTT, *Richelieu's Army*, pp. 186-187.

¹⁹ For example, AAE, CPS, vol. 46, fol. 93, 29 March 1653, reports arrival of regiment of 10 companies containing only 72 soldiers and 30 valets.

²⁰ PARROTT, *Richelieu's Army*, pp. 117-160; AAE, CPS, vol. 46, fol. 119, Marquis

From the ministerial perspective, the solution to all these issues would be a series of successful military campaigns to establish the French army's zone of operations beyond Piedmont, within the Spanish Milanese. If the army could establish itself permanently on enemy territory, extracting subsistence payments, requisitioning supplies, and maintaining itself over the winter quarter, it might resolve the besetting problems of an army that began each campaign late and under strength, whose basic costs were 50% higher than other French forces, and whose troops suffered the worst levels of desertion. It would be the Spanish who would now lose the initiative, facing a French army already embedded within the Milanese, and ready to start campaigning from the beginning of the year. Reinforcements might be shipped out to the army in the Milanese from France, but the core of the army would be permanently based in Italy without causing a diplomatic rupture with the Court at Turin, and while requiring a much lower proportion of its support from the French *bureau des finances*.

Getting the army of Italy into the Milanese was the main objective of both Richelieu and Mazarin's governments from the outbreak of war in the Italian theatre from 1635. Moreover, the control and garrisoning of the key fortress at Casale, in the Duke of Mantua's territory of Monferrato, ought to have provided a vital base for sustaining military operations in the Milanese. Yet despite this advantage, and the ministerial determination to press for the invasion and occupation of Spanish-controlled territory, this goal proved elusive throughout the twenty-five years of war²¹. At points in the mid 1640's it appeared that the breakthrough might be achieved, but the *Fronde* swept away these advantages, and indeed cost France her garrison at Casale in 1652. Following the resumption of military operations after 1653, the ministry was optimistic that billeting in the Milanese might be achieved over the winter of 1654-55; but they were disabused by the French commander, the *maréchal de Grancey*, who emphasized the vulnerability of any French footholds across the frontier and the limited extent that they could draw their subsistence from the surrounding territories²².

We shall see in the context of the 1657 campaign that the French

Villa to Mazarin, 27 April 1654, reporting that the Spanish army is in the field, but so far the French have assembled only a few companies from Burgundy.

²¹ For the Spanish perception of this threat, see MAFFI, *Il baluardo della corona*, pp. 57-60.

²² AAE, CPS, vol. 48, fol. 583, Grancey to Mazarin, 1 November 1654.

ministers still regarded the permanent establishment of the army in the Milanese as the solution to the problems of its support and operations. Meanwhile however the persistent failure in practice to achieve this goal had thrust the expensive, complex and volatile burdens of financing and supplying the army back onto a combination of central funding and the financial resources of the officers. From early in the war this led to a corrosive divergence of interests between central ministers, the generals and the regimental officers. The ministers grew frustrated by the persistent failure to achieve the breakthrough that would finally end the costly operational stalemate in this theatre. Equally though, the generals with the army of Italy quickly grasped that they had been sent to a campaign theatre where the central government, even when the goodwill existed, would simply not be able to meet its financial and logistical commitments to the army.

In 1640, Henri de Lorraine, comte d'Harcourt, conducted a remarkable campaign to save France's military position in Italy by lifting the Spanish siege of Casale-Monferrato, and recapturing Turin, which had been held by supporters of the Spanish party in the Piedmontese civil war. But his letters to the ministers, running parallel to these successes, were a litany of complaints about supply failure, about the inadequacy of the recruits that he was due to receive from France, and about the massive shortfalls in the funding that the central *bureau des finances* was supposed to have provided for the Italian theatre²³. During the siege of Turin, Harcourt pointed out that he had received just over one quarter of the funding nominally allocated to the army for 1640, and insisted repeatedly that without more money he would be forced to abandon the siege²⁴. After his success at Turin, Harcourt then used these claims about continued shortage of funds to reject any proposals for further campaigning in 1640²⁵. Like most of his fellow generals in the Italian theatre, Harcourt recognized the essential dilemma of command in these circumstances: success, if achieved, would be personally costly and gained in the teeth of funding and supply difficulties; failure would antagonize a government which expected the generals to take personal financial responsibility for the army if that was required to keep it operational. The gene-

²³ Ibid., vol. 30, fol. 501, Comte d'Harcourt to Secretary for War, Sublet de Noyers, (mid June) 1640, providing a detailed account of shortfalls in funding.

²⁴ Ibid., fol. 501-503, Harcourt to de Noyers, 13 June 1640.

²⁵ Ibid., vol. 31, fol. 771, no date; fol. 704, Harcourt to de Noyers, 24 December 1640.

rals sought to defend their reputations by asserting that the *bureau des finances* was deliberately choosing to deprive the army of the funds that were due to it. The finance and war ministers riposted that substantial sums had been regularly remitted to Italy, and in turn alleged that these funds had been subject to large-scale misappropriation²⁶. Richelieu's *Surintendant des Finances*, Claude Bullion, was vocal in describing the army of Italy as a bottomless sink of inflated expenditure, waste and corruption²⁷.

What further complicated the issues were the attitudes of those officers below the level of the generals – both the regimental officers with the army and the garrison commanders. These found themselves squeezed by the much higher costs of recruiting troops for the Italian theatre, the greater difficulty of retaining them in service, and the likelihood that any recourse to their own credit to meet the cost of food and munitions supply would be far more substantial than for their counterparts in the other French armies. In these circumstances it was tempting for the officers to take advantage of the theatre's distance from the centre to shade their limited accountability into overt corruption and misappropriation of funds²⁸. Less effective oversight encouraged the regimental and company officers to overstate the number of their soldiers, especially new recruits, to inflate demands for food rations and munitions, and to extort additional money and resources from local populations. Such practices grew endemic amongst governors and officers in garrisons, who hugely overstated the number of serving troops and their subsistence needs, and ran a variety of rackets to profit both from their own soldiers and the local inhabitants. Both officers and indeed some of the civilian administrators sought to extract what returns they could from an environment in which the costs of maintaining troops was exceptionally high, and where almost all of them could legitimately claim that they had at points been forced to spend from their own resources to make good shortages of bread, munitions or basic pay to their troops.

²⁶ Ibid., fol. 662, de Noyers to Mazarin, 17 December 1640.

²⁷ Ibid., fol. 414 and 662, de Noyers to Mazarin, 15 November and 17 December 1640, reporting Bullion's complaints about Italian expenditure and suspicions of corruption.

²⁸ PARROTT, *Richelieu's Army*, pp. 356-361; for the problems faced by the garrison commanders in Italy, where they were unable to live from local contributions, see J. GANGNIÈRES, COMTE DE SOUVIGNY, *Mémoires*, 3 vols, Paris 1906-09, II, pp. 238-239.

Significantly for the larger ministerial strategy of getting the army permanently onto enemy territory, the best opportunity for the officers to make illicit profits from their military activities was when they were quartered in the French provinces over the winter months and received cash payments to allow for their recruitment of additional soldiers²⁹. Thus the practical, financial interest of much of the officer corps potentially lay in *not* achieving the breakthrough on to enemy territory. For this would replace secure payments of a winter quarter allowance in France with a much less reliable and predictable situation in which funding would depend on extortion from occupied enemy territory.

The Campaign of 1657

The years immediately after the end of the *Frondes* had not been ones of military success, whether in the other campaign theatres or in Italy. In 1653 and 1654 the war-effort was devoted to trying to recover some of the losses suffered in Piedmont during the military collapse of the French civil war years. Taking the offensive in the campaign of 1655 the Franco-Modenese army had become bogged down in an over-ambitious bid to capture Pavia, deep in the Milanese, and had been forced into a humiliating and costly abandonment of the siege³⁰. Showing more strategic acumen in 1656, the joint army had targeted the major fortified city of Valenza, just inside the frontiers of the Milanese; on 19 September Mazarin received the welcome news that the city had surrendered a few days earlier³¹.

Though the capture of Valenza in September 1656 had been a welcome boost to France's military reputation during a year of setbacks elsewhere, it had strained the resources of the French forces in Italy to near breaking-point. The Spanish had not expected to lose the city, and began military preparations for a counter-attack almost immediately. A small French garrison was established over the winter, but the usual need to placate the House of Savoy meant that preparations

²⁹ This is described by Le Tellier when he was *intendant* with the army in 1641: Michel Le Tellier, pp. 57, 65 and 101-102, Le Tellier to Mazarin, Sublet de Noyers, 18 April, 28 May and 3 September 1641.

³⁰ SOUVIGNY, *Mémoires*, II, pp. 287-289; M. RIZZO, *Demografia, sussistenza e governo dell'emergenza a Pavia durante l'assedio del 1655*, in *Battaglie. L'evento, l'individuo, la memoria*, edited by A. BUONO and G. CIVALE, Palermo 2014, pp. 59-97.

³¹ MAZARIN, *Lettres*, VII, p. 374; SOUVIGNY, *Mémoires*, II, pp. 295-310.

to return the majority of the French forces back across the Alps began only weeks after the end of the siege³². The intention, as ever, was that the army, which had suffered heavy attrition during the 1656 campaign, would be refreshed by large-scale recruitment of new troops³³.

Meanwhile, the defence of Valenza required urgent attention. Yet Mazarin's letters in late 1656 had already been full of complaints directed to the generals, the administrators, and François-Auguste, marquis de Valavoire, the new governor of Valenza, about the cost of the siege, and the urgent need to manage new funds with economy and restraint³⁴. The emphasis on the need for economy had been a growing theme of Mazarin's letters to the officers and administrators with the army since 1653. In this case, like many others, careful management of funds proved impossible: the commanders in Italy were nervous and concerned at the risk of losing Valenza. On 8 October Mazarin wrote irritably to Louis de Bourbon, duc de Mercoeur, the commander of the French forces, accusing him of exaggerating the numbers of Spanish troops that could be mobilized for an immediate attack on the place³⁵.

Thus the early months of 1657 wore on in hurried activity to try to secure the supplies of food and munitions for Valenza, and to rebuild the fortifications. As the expenses mounted so did the blurring of lines about the ways these were being met: in particular there were mounting suspicions by the central government that costs were being deliberately inflated by the governor, Valavoire, and that at least some of his own claims for reimbursement were fictitious³⁶.

Mazarin's letters registered growing alarm as he confronted the size of the funding deficit opening up in Italy, months before the real 1657

³² Ibid., pp. 314-315.

³³ AAE, CPS, vol. 50, fol. 574-576, Brachet to Mazarin, 2 October 1656.

³⁴ Ibid., vol. 51, fol. 62, Mazarin to Brachet, 23 September 1656, on the excessive expenses of the siege; fol. 77-80v, Mazarin to Brachet, 8 October 1656, with a detailed account of Mazarin's financial concerns.

³⁵ Ibid., fol. 74-75, Mazarin to Mercoeur, 8 October 1656, sharply critical of his tolerance of disorders amongst the officers.

³⁶ Ibid., fol. 196, Mazarin to Valavoire, 17 March 1657: construction of new fortifications and suspicions about Valavoire's financial activity; fol. 224, Mazarin to Valavoire, 27 April 1657, concerning the latter's claim for 15,000 *livres* supposedly spent on the fortifications; Valavoire's response was to make further demands for reimbursement (ibid., vol. 52, fol. 327, Valavoire to Mazarin, 18 July 1657). Ibid., vol. 51, fol. 306v, Mazarin to Brachet, 5 July 1657, outraged at the cost of a contract to provide forage for the garrison at Valenza.

campaign was scheduled to begin³⁷. These concerns were not allayed when administrators such as the *intendant d'armée*, Jacques Brachet, drew attention to their own helplessness in the face of a deep-rooted culture of extravagance and wastage in the army of Italy³⁸. Seeking ways of cutting the costs of the army of Italy without directly challenging the interests of the army officers, Mazarin turned to the negotiation of the supply contracts for the bread rations. In January 1657 Mazarin wrote to Brachet that he had managed to negotiate a new contract with the Sr Marquisio that would massively undercut the previous contracts made with established *munitionnaires* such as Jean-Pierre Falcombel and François Jacquier. The services of Jacquier in particular were highly regarded by Mazarin, but Jacquier had previously made it clear that he could not lower the price for bread-supply to the field army of Italy below 42 *déniers* per ration³⁹. Marquisio had some previous business dealings with Mazarin, and his offer to supply the field army for 32 *déniers* per ration and the garrisons for 24 *déniers* seemed an irresistible saving on the projected costs of supplying the troops in Italy⁴⁰. However it soon became clear that Marquisio's contract was unrealistically priced, and he would not be able to deliver except at heavy personal loss. Early clashes between Marquisio's agents and the army administrators concerning which units were defined as garrison troops, and therefore to be supplied at the lower rate, were an augury of future problems⁴¹. But this was minor compared with the breakdown of supply that threatened the army in June and July, and which placed further fiscal burdens on the officers in the field.

It also became obvious as the months progressed that the plans for recruitment to replenish the army had gone catastrophically wrong from the ministry's perspective. The decision to allocate the costs of the winter quarter directly upon the French provinces of Dauphiné, Provence, Languedoc and Guienne had been successful, in that generous recruitment treaties had been met punctually and in cash through

³⁷ *Ibid.*, fol. 248, Mazarin to Brachet, 22 May 1657.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 52, fol. 288, Brachet to Mazarin, 21 June 1657, tactfully suggesting that the «princely and generous» nature of the two commanders makes it very difficult to achieve economies.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 51, fol. 147, Mazarin to Brachet, 5 January 1657.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 52, fol. 262, 15 June 1656, copy of the formal contract drawn up with Marquisio, which specifically – and dangerously – separates the payments for the supply of the campaign armies from the garrison troops.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 51, fol. 228, Mazarin to Brachet, 28 April 1657.

the winter months⁴². Yet as spring turned to summer and the regiments either failed to arrive, or did so massively under strength, it became apparent that the entire winter-quarter recruitment operation had been systematically exploited by the regimental officers to take the money and not raise the troops⁴³. The willingness to exploit such recruitment contracts may have been a well-established 'informal' mechanism to allow officer profiteering, but circumstances seem to have conspired in 1657 to have rendered the abuses particularly extreme. These circumstances included a particularly generous set of financial agreements for recruitment in view of the severe losses of troops sustained by most of the regiments in the previous campaign; the blind eye turned to the abuse by the provincial governors and other authorities, including one of the generals for the forthcoming campaign, Armand de Bourbon, Prince de Conti⁴⁴; the extent to which the officers felt particularly pressed by their financial contributions to the previous two campaigns of 1655 and 1656.

The ministerial response was nonetheless initially of outrage and scandalized amazement that this situation had been allowed to develop, and that the officers should have behaved with such corrupt disregard for their duty. The administrators on the ground, and especially the military commanders in the theatre, recognized more clearly the realities of this situation: they saw that an officer-corps, burdened with shares of subsistence costs for their troops, unpaid salaries and many other expenses, would almost inevitably seize the opportunity to recover some of their earlier costs and profit from the contracts. Moreover they argued that a punitive response of the sort wanted by central government would risk crippling the army at the opening of the campaign⁴⁵. Indeed the immediate logic of the situation suggested giving the regimental officers still more money to carry out the recruitment for which they had previously received the win-

⁴² *Ibid.*, vol. 52, fol. 223v, Mazarin to Brachet, 27 April 1657, confirming the full payments made in Bresse and Dauphiné; fol. 251, Mazarin to d'Estrades, 22 May, emphasizing that the officers in these provinces have received twice the normal levels of winter quarter payment.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, vol. 51, fol. 223v, Mazarin to Brachet, 27 April 1657, responding to the first indications of systematic fraudulence.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, fol. 254, Mazarin to Duke of Modena, 27 May 1657, in which Mazarin is explicitly critical of Conti's role in Languedoc in facilitating overpayment.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, fol. 248, 251 and 254, Mazarin to Brachet, Estrades and Modena, 22-27 May 1657, venting Mazarin's anger at the abuses in the recruitment treaties; *ibid.*, vol. 52, fol. 247, Brachet to Mazarin, 9 June 1657.

ter quarter funds⁴⁶. However the officers were treated, the estimates for the overall strength of the army were now wildly optimistic. It was evident that more regiments from within France would now need to be allocated to the Italian theatre if the army was to take the offensive.

This shortage of troops placed even greater pressure on calculations about the scale of military assistance that could be obtained from the Court of Turin. But the Savoyard Court continued to harbour suspicions of French military intentions, judged it imprudent to appear too much the willing accessory of French military designs, and had severe difficulties in raising the money necessary to get their forces into the field⁴⁷.

At this point, another set of interests might easily have come into play and asserted themselves against the overall strategic aims of the central government. Many field commanders, weighing up the costs of the operations that had already been undertaken to secure the French hold on Valenza, and the structural problems of supply and recruitment which were growing ever-more insistent, might tacitly have decided to allow the rest of the campaign to be spent in small-scale and defensive manoeuvres. The extent to which the ministers could do much about this sort of response was strictly limited. The campaign theatre was too distant, and the incentives and pressures available to the ministers too small to outweigh the commanders' calculations of personal cost and reputational damage likely to arise from attempting anything more ambitious. Perhaps unfortunately, the two generals in 1657 had sets of personal ambitions that aligned them with the ministry in wishing to launch a major offensive: Francesco d'Este, was concerned that without an assault on the Milanese from the west, Spanish and Imperial troops would devastate his Duchy of Modena; Armand de Bourbon, Prince de Conti, had pressured Mazarin, his uncle by marriage, into giving him the command in 1657 precisely to gain a major military success. With this, Conti aspired to counter-balance the achievements of his elder brother, the Prince de Condé,

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 51, fol. 254, Mazarin to Duke of Modena, 27 May 1657, critical of Modena's proposal simply to give the officers more money.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 52, fol. 227, Conti to Mazarin, 1 June 1657, reporting reluctance of the Duchess to honour military commitments; *ibid.*, vol. 51, fol. 281, 17 June 1657, Mazarin to Amoretti, confidante and minister of Marie Christine, concerning the delays in raising and despatching the Savoyard forces; by August any hope of obtaining more than 2000 Piedmontese infantry had been abandoned and even this was being delayed; fol. 357*v*, Mazarin to Amoretti, 8 August.

actively in rebellion against Mazarin and co-commander of the Spanish war-effort in North-East France⁴⁸.

The commanders therefore decided to undertake a siege of the city of Alessandria. The attraction was that it both opened up a route into the Milanese, but was also within convenient distance of the two French bases of Valenza and Asti. If large enough magazines were accumulated in both places, they could supply a French siege army without the need for extensive and vulnerable supply lines extended far back into Piedmont⁴⁹. But there were also considerable dangers: Alessandria was large, with a well-maintained set of defences. Standing on an exposed plain, it would require the besieging army to construct a full set of siege-works, some eight Piedmontese miles in total, and to maintain enough troops to man these against break-outs from the city and possible relief forces that the Spanish could launch from different directions⁵⁰. At the opening of the siege the combined forces of Modena and Conti numbered a healthy 7,000 cavalry, but only 8,000 infantry: from the very first, all the military calculations were based on the arrival of substantial additional infantry⁵¹. This would depend both on the promises made by the Duke of Savoy to provide a substantial Piedmontese contingent, and on the capacity to make good the significant shortfall of French troops by more recruitment and the despatch of new regiments from France⁵².

The initial stage of the operation was encouraging. Careful manoeuvring concealed the real intention of the armies, and allowed a surprise descent by the separate forces of Conti and Modena on the city during harvest time⁵³. By 15 July the armies had come together

⁴⁸ L. SIMEONI, *Francesco I d'Este e la politica italiana del Mazarino*, Bologna 1922; O. ROMBALDI, *Il duca Francesco I d'Este (1629-1658)*, Modena 1992, pp. 82-84; D. DE COSNAC, *Mémoires*, 2 vols, Paris 1852, I, pp. 248-250.

⁴⁹ AAE, CPS, vol. 52, fol. 247, Brachet to Mazarin, 9 June 1657, complaining that he is spending 1000 *livres* a day paying for additional transport and escorts to get supplies to Asti; fol. 283, Conti to Mazarin, 20 June 1657, on build-up of supplies in Valenza.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, fol. 331, Marquis Villa to Mazarin, 20 July 1657, on the extent of the siege works required.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, fol. 329, Conti to Mazarin, 20 July 1657.

⁵² *Ibid.*, vol. 51, fol. 357v, Mazarin to Amoretti, 8 August 1657, stressing the need for the troops from Piedmont for the siege; *ibid.*, fol. 367, Mazarin to Modena, 15 August 1657, recognizing Modena's concern about delays in the reinforcements from France.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, vol. 52, fol. 327, Valavoire to Mazarin, 18 July 1657, reporting that only

around the city and had started building the double lines of siege works⁵⁴.

From this point the difficulties started to mount. Despite the increasingly desperate appeals from Brachet, Conti, and Modena, the troops scheduled to return to Italy from France were either failing to arrive, or the regiments and individual companies arrived so under-strength as to be virtually useless. The officers who had been bribed to engage in last-minute recruitment to make good their failure to recruit over the winter, used the recruitment exercise as an excuse to defer setting off for the Italian theatre⁵⁵. Ambassador Ennemond Servien found it no easier to extract an agreement from the Duke of Savoy to allocate 3,000 infantry and 2,000 cavalry for the siege⁵⁶.

Meanwhile the numbers of troops with the siege army were starting to fall. Anxious to slow this attrition and retain the officers' goodwill, the generals sanctioned the distribution of far more bread rations than could be justified by the actual numbers of troops in the army. Mazarin and Le Tellier expressed disbelief that they could be simultaneously bombarded with letters warning them of the declining strength of the army, but at the same time expected to sign off an allocation of *pain de munition* of 30,000 rations per day. Brachet was frank about this wastage, writing that the over-allocation of bread was a necessary evil so long as the siege lasted; the commanders would not think of reducing it since it would risk further losses of soldiers and the alienation of the serving officers⁵⁷. What this argument neglected however was the already faulty supply contract negotiated with Marquisio: now that he had received a substantial financial advance and was aware that he could not meet the needs of the army at the price stipulated, he was anxious to find excuses to break the contract. In a series of confrontational orders, Marquisio told his agents and

900 infantry and 5-600 cavalry were left in the garrison at Alessandria, and that the French could expect to be masters of the city by 25th August.

⁵⁴ Ibid., fol. 335, Amoretti to Mazarin, 21 July 1657; fol. 355, Conti to Mazarin, 27 July 1657.

⁵⁵ Ibid., vol. 51, fol. 297, Mazarin to Sr Abadie, 22 June, concerning dragoon regiments refusing to leave the winter quarters.

⁵⁶ Ibid., vol. 52, fol. 337, Servien to Mazarin, 21 July 1657.

⁵⁷ Ibid., fol. 288, Brachet to Mazarin, 21 June 1657, seeking to justify a distribution of 20,000 rations per day, although as he admitted this infringed the regulations for bread-distribution. This steadily rose as the siege began to 30,000 (fol. 358, Brachet to Mazarin, 27 July 1657).

commissioners negotiating with local producers not to supply a single ration of bread over and above what had been stipulated in the contract⁵⁸. Brachet and Conti had already written at length to Mazarin that Marquisio's agents had failed to provide adequate transport for the movement of grain and bread, and that they were being forced to requisition additional carts and horses at their own expense simply to ensure that the supply chain could be maintained⁵⁹. A series of stormy letters written by Mazarin to Marquisio encountered indignant denials and, ultimately, requests for extra funds to make good the inadequate supply contract⁶⁰. These funds were reluctantly conceded as the price of keeping the army of Italy operational⁶¹. But the damage had already been done in adding a defective supply contract to the already burdensome logistical operation being patched-up and maintained by the officers on the ground.

Despite the initial reports, it soon became apparent that the garrison of Alessandria was larger than anticipated, and that in addition the civilian population was willing to serve as a militia. The Spanish moved substantial detachments of troops down towards Alessandria where they initially tested the French siege works and tried to block supply convoys⁶². The liveliness of the defence in turn made it impossible for the French troops in the siege works to spare a significant force which could challenge this build-up of Spanish troops beyond their lines.

Success or failure in the siege would depend on whether the French army could outpace the build-up of Spanish troops long enough for the besieged to run out of food or munitions, or for the French to launch an assault. The generals' letters from the siege works sought to persuade Mazarin that success was a few weeks away. But this was belied by the incessant discussion of supply difficulties, delays and failure in getting new troops to the siege, disputes and conflicts over the management of the artillery, and the inability to press the Court at Turin to make good its promised support⁶³. One upbeat moment

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, fol. 227, Conti to Mazarin, 1 June 1657.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, fol. 317, Brachet to Mazarin, 14 July 1657, on Marquisio's evasions.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 51, fol. 302v, Mazarin to Marquisio, 28 June 1657.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, fol. 269 and 271, 7 and 9 June 1657, Mazarin to Brachet, concerned at Marquisio's threats and stressing that money will be found to supplement the contracts if necessary.

⁶² *Ibid.*, vol. 52, fol. 351, M de Baas to Mazarin, 26 July 1657.

⁶³ Contrast rumours of weakness and demoralisation of the garrison at Alessandria passed on by Ambassador Servien, with the letter sent by Brachet, outside

was provided by the repulse of a premature Spanish attempt to break through the French lines and lift the siege on 8 August⁶⁴. But the triumph proved short-lived. The Spanish continued to increase their forces on the flanks of the French siege works, and then used their artillery to bombard the French positions⁶⁵. Desertion rates escalated, while Brachet wrung his hands in letters to Mazarin over the imminent shortfalls of money and the vast over-consumption of bread rations⁶⁶.

The promises of further reinforcements seemed more and more illusory. An agent from Turin wrote that even 780 infantry, which was all that was now offered from Piedmont, would turn out to be far fewer in practice, while the three French regiments from Provence and extra recruits that were to turn the tide remained stubbornly slow to materialize⁶⁷. The increasingly hopeless situation was broken by the generals' decision to lift the siege. According to Brachet, the decision was taken on 14 August, subject to the faint possibility that the promised reinforcements would transform the situation if they arrived in the next few days⁶⁸. But in reality even if these troops had arrived, it is unlikely by this stage that the slide into failure could have been prevented⁶⁹. On 22 August the siege was lifted by the remnants of the French army, which, as Conti noted, had not experienced a single day's loss of rations, but whose officers and men had nonetheless become totally demoralized⁷⁰. The siege had lasted only just over a month, but had exhausted the resources, manpower and military

Alessandria, 5 days later and reporting exactly the opposite (*ibid.*, fol. 370 and 376, Servien/Brachet to Mazarin, 4 and 9 August 1657).

⁶⁴ P. DE CLERMONT, MARQUIS DE MONTGLAT, *Mémoires*, 3 vols, Paris 1825, III, pp. 42-43.

⁶⁵ AAE, CPS, vol. 52, fol. 376, Brachet to Mazarin, 9 August 1657.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, fol. 376, Brachet to Mazarin, 9 August 1657, suggesting that the available cash will run out in two days if the generals do not advance more money on their own credit; fol. 397, Brachet to Mazarin, 16 August 1657, citing early discussions amongst the generals about the possibility of abandoning the siege.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, fol. 397, Brachet to Mazarin, 16 August 1657; fol. 402, Mesnil to Mazarin, 17 August 1657.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, fol. 397, Brachet to Mazarin, 16 August 1657.

⁶⁹ Some of the additional regiments seem to have been as weak as those they would have reinforced: see, for example, AAE, *Mémoires et documents*, vol. 275, fol. 28, Mazarin to la Meilleraye, 7 September 1657, on the failure to bring his regiment up to an effective strength, despite it having been one of the units that Conti and Modena had been relying upon.

⁷⁰ MONTGLAT, *Mémoires*, III, pp. 42-43; AAE, CPS, vol. 52, fol. 409, Conti to Mazarin, 19 August 1657.

will of the army of Italy. Moreover it was clear that, though the campaign season was far from ended, the army would do nothing else of any significance during the weeks or months remaining, despite intermittent pressure from the ministers⁷¹.

At face value, the army had simply become demoralized in the course of a siege which had proved over-ambitious and inadequately resourced. The *mémoires* of Paule de Clermont, marquis de Montglat, provide what passed for an official explanation of the failure, in which heavy casualties from enemy fire and high levels of sickness, together with concern to protect the lines of communication of the besieging army led to the decision to withdraw⁷². But beneath this public explanation, Mazarin and his fellow ministers pointed to something much closer to a tacit mutiny by the officers and soldiers; moreover the generals and even senior administrators like Brachet and the ambassador in Turin, Ennemond Servien, came under suspicion of complicity in this⁷³. At huge additional cost the bread contract with Marquisio had been maintained, and by the admission of the commanding officers the besieging army had not lacked bread; the issues behind the collapse of morale appeared to relate to financing the siege, and, above all, to the failure either to maintain the strength of the besieging army or to secure the necessary reinforcements.

Mazarin, though he accepted the setback in public and did not specifically name those he believed culpable, was exasperated by the failure. This exasperation was worsened when some of the senior officers and administrators sought to blame the ministers for failing to provide adequate money and securing the reinforcements needed to sustain the siege. In a series of angry letters to Brachet, Ambassador Servien, Modena and Conti, Mazarin put the ministry's case that no army had ever received so much hard cash in a single campaign. Having previously hinted at the far more cost-effective management of armies in the other campaign theatres, he now launched into explicit accounts of how much less the support and supply of the war-effort in North-east France had cost in the same campaign, and how much more successful it had been. Mazarin was not slow in arguing that

⁷¹ Ibid., fol. 467, Brachet to Mazarin, 19 September 1657, dismisses any possibility of an attack on Mortara.

⁷² MONTGLAT, *Mémoires*, III, pp. 42-43.

⁷³ Mazarin's suspicions were stoked by letters from Brachet which announced, for example, that he was unable to persuade the generals to act severely against captured deserters «for fear of losing all the remaining troops» (AAE, CPS, vol. 52, fol. 419, 25 August 1657).

both Conti and Modena should have been more prepared to use their personal access to credit to make good delays in getting money to the army and to support the supply operations⁷⁴.

Above all, he went considerably further in confronting, as he saw it, the nexus of damaging interests at work in the failure of the campaign. Mazarin suggested that the shortage of infantry was a result of the officers' corruption: he argued that some 3,000 further infantry were in North Italy and could have been drawn into the siege, but – and whether through the generals' complicity or incompetence was left implicit – they were not deployed, instead being left spread out amongst garrisons and across Piedmont. This failure, Mazarin suggested, was deliberate: many officers recognized that the capture of Alessandria would almost certainly sentence them to winter quarters in North Italy – on enemy territory – which they regarded as a far less attractive financial proposition than collecting the recruitment allowances for their soldiers while wintering in the French provinces⁷⁵.

Mazarin's provocative retaliation involved threatening a showdown with both the interests of the army officers and the Court of Turin, by announcing on 5 September that none of the troops or their officers would be returning to France⁷⁶. All the French troops were to be quartered in North Italy over the coming winter months, whether on occupied enemy territory or in Piedmont. The order produced a flood of objections and attempted qualifications from the senior officers and administrators in Italy⁷⁷. At this point Conti formally requested leave from the army, resigning his command and refusing to have anything to do with a proposal which he recognized would poison relations with the regimental officers and the soldiers for the forthcoming year. As the autumn wore on the ministerial team's determination was gradually eroded by the officers' insistence on the immense risks and difficulties involved in wintering in the Milanese⁷⁸. However, in what was to prove a compromise which changed the course of the campaign in 1658, instead of allowing the troops to return to France, the bulk of the army was suddenly moved eastwards. Negotiating passage through the territory of the Duke of Parma, they

⁷⁴ AAE, CPS, vol. 53, fol. 15-22, Mazarin to Brachet, 4 September 1657, pointing out that the two generals could have used their own credit perfectly well to raise 30–40,000 *livres*.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 52, fol. 441, Mazarin to Ennemond Servien, 5 September 1657.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, fol. 254, Brachet to Mazarin, 14 September 1654.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, fol. 463, St André-Montbrun to Mazarin, 18 September 1657.

marched across the border into Mantua, ignored the Gonzaga duke's protestations of neutrality and occupied large parts of his duchy⁷⁹. With no resistance from the ducal forces in Mantua, and with the Spanish in Milan on the defensive, the French forces were able to extract subsistence, amass supplies and await reinforcements for the campaign of 1658⁸⁰.

Conclusion

It is clear from this account of the 1657 campaign in Italy that traditional arguments for the progress of central – ministerial or royal – control over army operations and organization in the years following 1653 are distinctly premature. Amidst the claims and mutual accusations that surrounded the failure of the campaign, the patterns of various potentially conflicting interest groups within and outside the army were as clearly visible as they had been in the 1630s. The ministers, whether Richelieu or Mazarin and their teams of specialized subordinates, were committed to campaigning in the Italian theatre, yet could not avoid comparing its costs, communication difficulties and diplomatic complexities unfavourably with the other campaign theatres – especially the armies on the north-eastern frontier. But the ministerial suspicions of the expense and limited accountability of the theatre had its mirror image in the attitudes of the commanders of the Italian armies. For them, the Italian theatre received less financial support from the centre and more unreliable supply contracting. At the same time as this more limited commitment, the local management of the war-effort south of the Alps came under regular criticism from the ministers as extravagant and corrupt. In response, generals, governors of places and the senior administrators adopted a shared rhetoric to stress the inadequacy of resources, the neglect of the theatre, and their limited personal access to financial resources and credit – an obvious bid to minimize over-exposure to the financial demands of perpetually under-budgeted military operations⁸¹.

⁷⁹ Ibid., vol. 54, fol. 31, Brachet to Mazarin, 17 January 1658.

⁸⁰ MONTGLAT, *Mémoires*, III, pp. 64-65.

⁸¹ On 2 January 1657 Brachet reminded Mazarin that he had already advanced 35,000 *écus* on his own credit, and that unless he received his salary he would have no more access to credit (AAE, CPS, vol. 52, fol. 5). As the siege was collapsing

The operation to besiege Alessandria may have foundered on the simple strategic impracticality of trying to take too large a city with forces that were insufficiently strong or well-sited to resist a Spanish relief operation. In this it would have been similar to the failed siege of Pavia in 1655. That however understates much evidence that the generals were commanding an army which had little collective will to prosecute this siege with vigour, or to see a decisive outcome. Mazarin's insinuation was probably unfounded that the generals themselves had conspired with their officers to ensure that the siege would fail, and thus avert the risk of being forced to winter in the Milanese. It seems unlikely that Conti and Modena were complicit: both wished to see military success in 1657. It nonetheless demonstrated their limited control over another defined interest group within the army of Italy. And this interest group, that of the regimental officers, is one very different in its priorities and understanding of its situation from, say, the German colonel-proprietors of the army operating earlier in Germany, or indeed their French counterparts serving in the army on the Flanders frontier. And certainly some of the actions of the generals may be seen as an attempt to purchase the favour of that interest: turning a blind eye to the embezzlement of winter quarter funding, and refusing to punish the officers – indeed proposing that they should receive more funding to complete their recruitment; over-providing rations of bread, knowing that the surpluses would be used or resold by the officers. Both the generals and the administrators seem to have taken a conciliatory view of officers whose units were substantially under strength or who did too little to prevent the desertion of their troops. Even where there were suspicions of misappropriated funds and invented expenses, the army authorities trod carefully.

Yet it would seem that none of this was enough to motivate and retain the support of the regimental officers within the army. The burdens of maintaining troops beyond the Alps, the costs of making up for failed supply and munitions contracts, the restricted opportunities to draw resources from the localities, especially Piedmont, all tipped the balance for the officers with the army in a way that their counterparts in the armies on the north-eastern frontiers of France would not have recognized. In these theatres, officers would tolerate moderate financial demands on their private funds; they recognized that

Brchet appealed to Mazarin to be relieved of his intendency, specifically claiming that he could not sustain the borrowing that he had been forced to undertake (*ibid.*, fol. 366, 2 August 1657).

supply networks, remittance of funds, and the effective management of reinforcements and quartering, would ensure that they could draw regular, moderate compensation from army operations, and that the army would continue to be effective without becoming heavily dependent on their credit. After over twenty years of operations in North Italy there was no such confidence amongst officers who found themselves serving in this theatre. The constituent officers in the armies felt burdened, and were not confident that the generals could support their interests sufficiently to save them from further personal commitment to the costs of military operations. If they were not in fact actively mutinous, they considered that their commitment to the conduct of the effort was not unlimited, and clearly exceeded by the demands and burdens of the siege of Alessandria.

In the larger context of general military operations from 1635-1659, this failure to make the various constituent interests work in any consistent and coherent direction in the army of Italy may help to explain what is perhaps the most striking issue of all: why, over the twenty-five years of campaigning, the French armies made no military progress in Italy remotely comparable with the successes achieved elsewhere on her frontiers.

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