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The Venetian Army and the Morea War

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Abstract

When the Venetian ruling class declared war against the Ottoman Empire in 1684, it wanted to share in the already foreseeable success of the warring European great powers, wanted to "mangiare in compagnia", as the Venetian colonel Francesco Muazzo later put it. "Giova più una guerra che ci conserva che una pace che ci distrugge" - the well-known statement of the Savio del consiglio Pietro Valier resonates with the wishes of the Venetian leaders, which sometimes went beyond the politically rational. The army, however, which was the instrument of these desires and goals, functioned well on the whole in the (first) Morea War. The army as an institution will be the focus of this lecture. It is about the military history of the Morea War, but not primarily about the history of military operations. It deals with the structural, social and cultural history of the Venetian army of the time, with its recruitment and composition, the command structure, the problems of leadership, internal communication and coordination as well as supply related to the "diversity" of the army, the degree of military professionalization and the effects of these structural features on performance on the battlefields both in Greece and Dalmatia.

The structure of the Venetian army in Venice's "Iron Century" between the mid-17th century and 1718, corresponded to the typical tripartite division of armies not only of the "Turkish Wars" of the early modern period. The armies of this epoch were normally composed firstly of a core or main army, secondly of territorial defense forces with militia-like units that were resident and rooted in the country, and thirdly of units of freedmen and irregulars. In this respect, the Venetian army resembled both the Ottoman and those of the Central and East European states and empires. Such structural parallelisms facilitated the transimperial mobility of soldiers between the European markets of violence and arenas of violence. Personnel cross-connections to the wars especially in Central Europe are therefore frequent. The foreign high officers had to fit into the dual structure of leadership typical for the Venetian army. The dual leadership consisted of a nobile, i.e. a representative of the Venetian patriciate, who was ultimately entitled to make decisions alone but was normally militarily inexperienced, and the paid professional soldier (condottiere) who had come from abroad and who commanded the army but was not allowed to act alone. Depending not least on the temperament of the people involved, these dual leaderships functioned differently. The army itself consisted of a mosaic of "popoli e corpi militari" (Piero Del Negro). Nevertheless, as a brief outlook at the end of the paper will show, it was not the structural deficiencies of the army that brought about the failure of the Venetian expansion strategy.