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Ars militaris

The Art of War as Aesthetic Practice in the 18th Century

Abstract

The armies of the late 17th and 18th centuries can be understood as an aesthetic figure of reflection in the sense of the Collaborative Research Center (CRC) 1391. They were hybrid, mobile collective bodies, living machines, that consisted of a perfect interplay of people and arms. The material – human bodies and equipment – was shaped into a geometric figuration on the basis of a very sophisticated and explicit knowledge of form and rules, resulting in perfectly symmetrical and synchronous movement that could be controlled from the outside, similar to courtly ballets or ceremonies. The military became an object of artistic perfection – an ideal that, however, proved to be a hindrance on the battlefield. My thesis is that the inherent logic of design, which primarily followed the rules of geometry, tended to displace and dominate the pragmatic-instrumental military logic, according to which an army serves to fight a battle. I attempt to show that this was taken to the extreme in the case of the so-called Soldier King, Frederick William of Prussia.

Keywords

Art of War, Frederick William I, Geometry, Military, Prussia, Representation

1. The Army as a *Figure of Aesthetic Reflection*?

Is the 'art of war' an aesthetic practice? Can an army be a figure of aesthetic reflection? The Tübingen CRC 1391 investigates aesthetic practices in the context of concerns apart from aesthetics, and in so doing employs the broadest possible heuristic concept of aesthetics.[1] Aesthetic practice in the widest sense means creative engagement with material based on a particular knowledge of form and design. The CRC intends to analyze the interaction between the inherent logic of artistic technique and the pragmatic logic of daily life, between the autonomy and heteronomy of form and function. Design will

* Translated by David B. Dollenmayer. Quotations for which no other translation is cited have also been translated by Dollenmayer.

1 On the research program of the CRC 1391 *Different Aesthetics*, see the contribution by Annette Gerok-Reiter and Jörg Robert in this volume, pp. 3–48, especially section 6, "Figures of Aesthetic Reflection."

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be regarded from a praxeological perspective. This can be understood as the ability to always look at the aesthetic object as simultaneously a material product and a concrete, physical practice, as both a made product and a process of making – parallel to the praxeological approach of historians, who use it primarily to analyze social and political configurations.[2] At a time when no one was yet talking about praxeology, Norbert Elias adduced dance as an example of a social "figuration" that appears as both object and process, in other words, a thing that arises in practice – performatively – and actually exists only by being carried out.[3] Thus there are structural patterns that take shape in and through physical practice as participants follow (mostly implicit and informal, but sometimes explicit and formal) rules.[4]

A figure of aesthetic reflection should be a figuration in which the interaction of formal autonomy and functional heteronomy is manifest. What I want to introduce here as such a figure of aesthetic reflection are the armies of the late 17th and the 18th centuries: hybrid, mobile collective bodies – living machines – that comprise men and weapons in perfect synergy. With the help of extremely sophisticated and explicit rule-based formal knowledge, the material of human bodies and equipment was designed as a geometric figuration consisting in perfectly symmetrical and synchronous movement controlled from without. An army as a living machine only exists performatively, in rule-directed physical implementation itself. My thesis is that the internal logic of design that primarily followed the rules of geometry gradually overruled and suppressed the pragmatic, instrumental military logic according to which an army exists to fight battles. In the case of the so-called Soldier King, Frederick William I of Prussia, this tendency was carried to an extreme.

As evidence for my thesis, I will first briefly sketch where the 'art of war' – *ars militaris* – was located in the conceptual coordinate system of the time between acting, producing, and knowing. Then I will examine the double role of geometry, which was both a method of knowing and producing and a standard of beauty. Finally, I will describe the army of Frederick William I as an object of two aesthetic practices: as an artifact of production and an artifact of collection and exhibition. In this regard, one can see the example of the Soldier King as 'extraordinarily normal,' an extreme case that allows us to better recognize what was average and normal.

2 The literature on this topic is vast. Cf. for historical studies, e.g., Bevir / Rhodes 2010; Brendecke 2015; Haasis / Rieske 2015. The similarity between the praxeological and performative approaches is obvious, cf., e.g., Martschukat / Patzold 2003; Fischer-Lichte / Wulf 2004.

3 Elias 1978, p. 262.

4 Along these lines, *Zedlers Universal-Lexicon* writes "Art sometimes also means the work itself that art has created"; Zedler: Universal-Lexicon, col. 2141; cf. Rogg / Nowosadtko 2008, p. 13.

2. *Ars militaris* in the System of Disciplines

Where did the 'art of war' fit in the conceptual coordinate system of the time, circa 1700, between acting, producing, and knowing? Zedler's *Universal-Lexicon* – as always the first source in such questions – writes under the lemma "Kriegs-Kunst" (art of war; 1737) that 'art' or 'the arts' is nothing but "certain reflections and observations, initially founded on experience, whose foundation has been subsequently investigated after they have been codified in certain rules from which consequences are drawn."[5] Diderot, who is known to have favored *ars* over *scientia* as well as the *artes mechanticae* over the *artes liberales*, advanced a similar argument in his *Encyclopédie*. In the central article on *art*, which explicitly encompasses both *artes liberales* and *artes mechanicae*, including *art militaire*, he writes that every art has its theory and its practice ("Tout art a sa spéculation et sa pratique"). The former is the abstract, non-operative knowledge of the rules ("connaissance inopérative des regles"), the latter their habitual, unreflective use ("usage habituel et non réfléchi des même règles"); both things must come together. Diderot defines *art* in contrast to *science*: "Si l'object s'exécute, la collection et la disposition technique des règles selon lesquelles il s'exécute, s'appelle art." The goal of every art, including the art of war – *art militaire* – consists in "d'imprimer certaines formes déterminées sur une base donnée par la nature."[6] The *artes mechanicae*, he asserts, stand in the middle between craft and science. The craft involves orally transmitted knowledge and experience, the science abstract, generalizable, academic knowledge transmitted in writing.

The Encyclopedists encapsulated what had been developing since the 15th century, namely, the cognitive and social upgrading of artisanal production. Traditionally, the *artes mechanicae* were clearly subordinated to the *artes liberales*; they were regarded as *artes serviles* since they provided the necessities of life and were the business of the third estate, the commoners.[7] That changed gradually as the sensational technical advances of the Renaissance – from optics and engineering to navigation and weaponry – promoted the wealth and social standing of those who devoted their talents to them. More and more disciplines were added to the *artes mechanicae*, from horticulture to horology and even politics. Social advancement depended on cognitive advancement in the formulation of explicit, written rules for art (*ars*) that instructed mere practical habit (*usus*), as Hendrick Goltzius depicted in an allegorical work of 1582 (Fig. 1). His allegory

5 Zedler: Universal-Lexicon, col. 1916.

6 Diderot: Art.

7 Krafft 1999; Leng 2002; Leng 2008. Raimundus Lullus associates the activities of waging war, trading, and manufacturing with the classes *milites*, *mercatores*, and *populus*. On the other hand, in *Didascalicon* (c. 1130), Hugh of Saint Victor, in addition to *architectura*, also names *ars theatrica* (knights' games) as one of the *artes mechanicae.*

Fig. 1. Hendrick Goltzius (1558–1617): *Ars et Usus*, 1582, copper engraving, 198 × 138 mm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Inv. No. RP-P-OB-10.091.

reflects the explosive increase in the number of instructional manuals for all fields of human endeavor – from recipes to fortifications – that verbalized formerly implicit, practical knowledge of production and transformed it into explicit written rules.[8] As early as circa 1500, first manuals of the *ars belli* began to appear.

3. Geometry as Method and Principle of Aesthetic Design

What linked head and hand and made production capable of theory was mathematics, and in particular geometry. Diderot too emphasized that its mastery was indispensable for most arts – indeed, that academic geometry was simple compared to the geometry of the workshop ("géometrie de la boutique").[9] Intellectual and experimental geometry complemented each other, he maintained, and their unprecedented, fruitful cooperation was responsible for the immense technical progress of recent centuries. The examples he mentions are printing, shipbuilding, and last but not least, the art of war.[10] The latter included not just the artifacts produced by artillery engineers and fortress architects. Military tactics also obeyed the rules of the productive arts, since in them, men as well as weapons were construed and treated as material, as objects of technical design. Thereby, the character of the art of war was transformed from *actio* – the brilliant commander's strategic art in controlling fortune – to *factio*: construction of a technical plan. Or put another way: from virtuoso dealing with contingency to eliminating contingency as completely as possible.[11]

Geometry was not just the method that had ennobled the *artes mechanicae* and led to rapid civilizing progress in fortress construction, navigation, and weapons technology. It was not just a scientific method but also a principle of aesthetic design. The crux of the matter is that geometry guaranteed both theoretical robustness and aesthetic perfection because it represented the design principle of divine creation. According to Johannes Kepler it was "coeternal with the divine mind and is God himself," for it offered God as well as humankind the patterns with which God had created the world.[12] Geometry promised beauty and harmony not just in heaven but on earth as

8 Stichweh 1984, p. 177; Daston 2022.

9 Diderot: Art.

10 Diderot: Art (*De la Géometrie des Arts*). Christian Wolff had already defined *technica* or *technologia* as the discipline of art. Art is the capability of man, "partly by the powers of his mind and partly by the powers of his body to bring a thing to realization, which without him would not be realized." Artists themselves, Wolff thought, were often unaware of the rules they applied to their work; the science of technology would make them explicit; Buschmann 1999, pp. 26f.

11 Cf. the distinction between acting and producing, based on the Aristotelian distinction between *actio* and *factio* in Arendt 1998.

12 Kepler: Harmonices Mundi Libri, p. 304, cf. p. 146.

well. It contained the rules for imposing order on the omnipresent chaos, not least in politics. Hobbes also made geometry the foundation of his new political science, promising absolute certainty independent of religious conflict.[13] According to an often-cited passage in the Introduction to *Leviathan*, "Nature, the art whereby God hath made and governs the world, is by the art of man, as in many other things, so in this also imitated, that it can make an artificial animal. [...] For by art is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMONWEALTH, or STATE, in Latin CIVITAS, which is but an artificial man [...]."[14] And as Hobbes points out in *Leviathan* II, chapter 20, this imitation follows clear, infallible rules: "The skill of making, and maintaining commonwealths, consisteth in certain rules, as doth arithmetic and geometry [...]."[15] As a product of human construction, the state appeared not less calculable than a geometric figure or a clockwork.

The *mos geometricus* was dominant not only in political theory but everywhere – in architecture and horticulture, music and dance, fencing and equestrianism, in court ceremonial,[16] and, last but not least, in the military (Fig. 2).[17] In the case of fortress construction, the central role of geometry is obvious. From the basic figures of circle and rectangle, mathematicians, construction engineers, and trained laymen built more and more complicated fortifications and outdid themselves in creating works of great beauty and symmetry.[18] But even here, the logic of design was superimposed on practical functionality. This is already evident in the fact that various ideal examples were often carried out only on paper, in elaborate printed works.

And even the armies themselves were subjected to the theoretical and aesthetic standards of geometry. And that had the effect of placing the art of war in very close relation to a court ceremonial that around 1700, by way of geometry, was also raised to the status of a science, *scientia* (Fig. 3). Choreography was of central importance in both cases, the performative production of order and harmony through precisely calculated movement in space; in both cases, precise staging guaranteed centralized control and mastery of contingency. Hanns Friedrich Fleming, a classic author of Baroque military science, considered war as the prime mover of standard ceremonial procedure in general, of which his contemporaries were so proud.

13 Röd 1970.

14 Hobbes: Leviathan, p. ix.

15 Hobbes: Leviathan, p. 195.

16 Examples in Mulryne 2004.

17 Already noted by Eichberg 1977; Kleinschmidt 1989; Bröckling 1997; Preisendörfer 2000; Luh 2004; Sikora 2008; Birk 2012; Füssel 2019; a brief survey in Schönauer / Hohrath 2020.

18 Duffy 1985 is seminal.

Fig. 2. Anonymous artist: Athena, goddess of war and the (mechanical) arts, copper engraving, in: Hanns Friedrich von Fleming: Der vollkommene teutsche Soldat [...], Leipzig: Johann Christian Martini, 1726. ETH Zurich, Sign.: Rar 9315.

> In our times, ceremonial procedure has reached an apex; war itself has had a great part therein. The ceremonial of war is quite clearly expressed [...] in the formation of battalions, passages, taking prisoners, [...] declaring war, assaulting and storming, challenging, capitulating, and surrendering forts, but especially in military exercises and various other actions.[19]

Nota bene: not just the preliminaries, not just maneuvers, but also assaults and storming of forts – the violent actions themselves – were regarded as ceremonial events regulated by geometry. From today's perspective, this seems grotesque, for war is the very epitome of chaos, violence, and unpredictability. But the fact that one could regard war as a perfectly ceremonial, choreographed *theatrum belli*, as a dance or a board game, shows that it was waged within a framework of specific class-based rules shared in principle by the European nobility, independent of quickly shifting alliances and enmities.

19 Fleming: Der vollkommene teutsche Soldat, p. 94; cf. Füssel 2019.

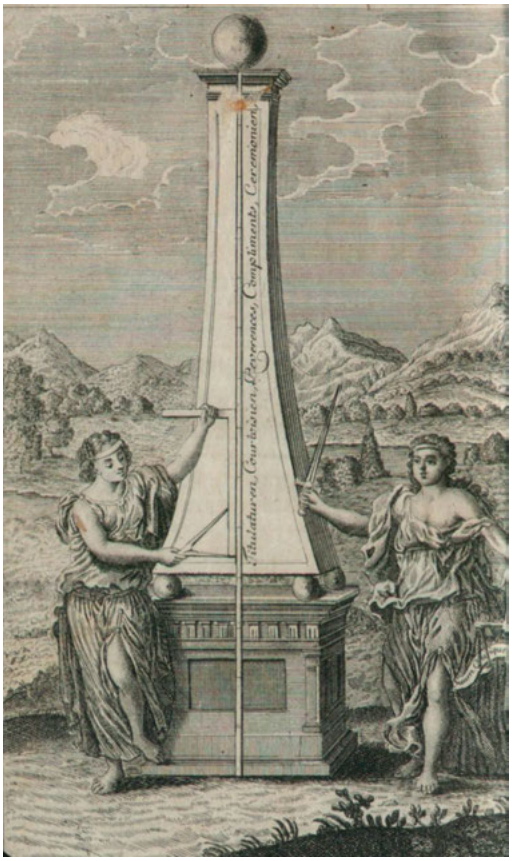

Fig. 3. Georg Paul Busch: Ceremonial and Geometry, copper engraving, in: Julius Bernhard von Rohr: Einleitung zur Ceremoniel-Wissenschafft Der großen Herren [...], Berlin: Johann Andreas Rüdiger, 1733, Frontispiece. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Sign.: J.publ.e. 372 b.

4. The Army as an Object of Aesthetic Practice, 1: Producing

Because they needed to defend themselves against the Spanish, around 1600 the counts of Orange-Nassau – as commanders of the rebellious Netherlands – introduced a new form of military discipline.[20] In order to make foot soldiers more mobile and the extremely awkward use of firearms more efficient, they subdivided the actions of their soldiers into the smallest possible units, which had to be precisely performed upon command. The motility of an entire body of troops was to be increased by restricting the motility of each individual soldier.[21] Instruction manuals contained precise illustrations of each element of a movement so that they could be precisely rehearsed (Fig. 4).

20 Cf. footnote 17; Kriegsbuch des Grafen; as well as the older literature: Jähns 1890; Jany 1967; Delbrück 1985.

21 Kleinschmidt 1989, pp. 146f.

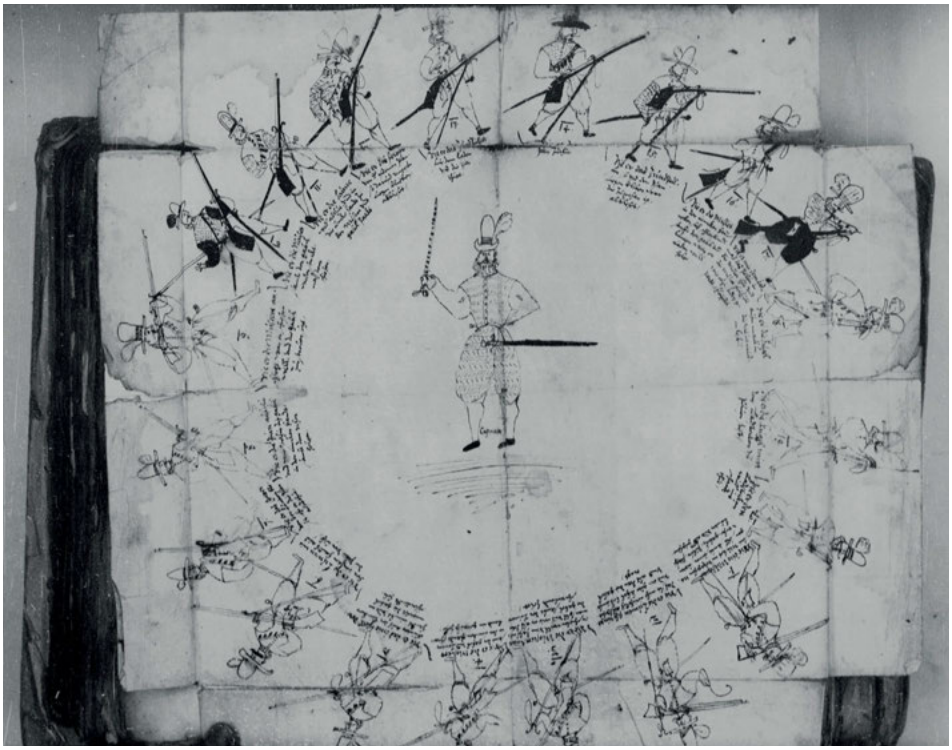

Fig. 4. Standardized series of motions for loading a musket, pen and ink drawing, from the military science papers of Count Johann VII of Nassau-Siegen, vol. 3 (in the original: Tomus 1 and 2), fol. 155^{v}–156^{r}. Wiesbaden, Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv (old Dillenburger Archive), Sign.: HHStAW Bestand 171 Nr. K 923.

Establishing each individual movement in the sequence of loading and firing ensured that an entire troop would fire in a regular rhythm of ordered salvoes. Individual soldiers were precisely lined up in rank and file and their movements so synchronized that they could be moved in any direction on command. Through perfect "drill" – also a new concept – the troop was to be transformed into a flexible, steerable, artificial body whose movements in a battle would function as precisely as during exercises in camp. Soldiers were supposed to react not individually to the enemy but collectively to an order. Personal valor and heroic single combat were to become superfluous. In the sources, one finds the aesthetic concept of "Zierlichkeit" (elegance)[22] to describe troops thus trained. And in fact, the innovative drill doubtless raised the central controllability of military operations and accounts for the superiority of the Netherlandish troops

22 Kleinschmidt 1989, pp. 146f.

against the Spanish, as well as for the successes of Swedish troops in the Thirty Years' War. The military reforms of Orange-Nassau were a tactical revolution but also a revolution in military aesthetics.

While European armies came to a standstill after the Thirty Years' War, this method experienced further refinement and is generally agreed to have achieved near perfection in Brandenburg-Prussia under the Soldier King, who was deeply influenced by the set of regulations issued by his admired fellow ruler, Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Dessau, in 1704.[23] However, Frederick Wilhelm violated the aristocratic norms of his time, first by himself becoming head drill master of his army – a task normally left to non-commissioned officers – and second, especially by not waging any wars at all with it, except one at the beginning of his reign. With his perfectly drilled troops, he basically found himself in concord – but also competition – with other European potentates, as shown for example by the lavishly produced manual *Der vollkommene teutsche Soldat* (The Complete German Soldier, Figs. 5–8).

One can easily follow the increasing geometricizing and aestheticizing of the army – and more precisely, the infantry – in the Prussian military regulations of the early 18th century. The Soldier King's infantry regulations (1714, 1718, and 1726) expanded steadily from 246 to 642 pages, despite the fact that in 1726, all passages concerning economics and logistics were moved to a separate manual. The regulations contained descriptions of unequaled minuteness and precision for the assembly, deployment, and movement of various units – from the alignment, marching, and turning of individual platoons to an entire regiment – and for the handling of muskets: loading and firing in changing circumstances, while standing or moving. Moreover, the regulations contained precise instructions for equipping, training, and discipline in the field and in the garrison, from the oath of allegiance to the burial of the dead.

The first task was to train the "material," to bring the "plastic mass" into a "solid form" – a metaphor also prized by Prussian historians of the 19th and 20th centuries.[24] To do so, it was necessary to standardize the individual human and non-human elements that formed the collective body in their external appearance, not only in the cut and color of their uniforms but also by selecting recruits according to their size and attractive features, and above all by training their posture and movements. For example:

23 The first drill regulations were written by Margrave Philipp Wilhelm von Brandenburg-Schwedt (1702); cf. Hinrichs 1941, pp. 345 and 360–362; Jany 1967, p. 557. Rohrschneider 2008 points to the fundamental difference between *disciplina* of the counts of Orange-Nassau and the Prussian drill. Discipline of the former was a moral category, namely "self-discipline" in the sense of the Stoics and Justus Lipsius, while Prussian drill was conducted under the constant threat of physical punishment and consisted in making bodily movements automatic and habitual.

24 Droysen 1869, p. 17; Hinrichs 1964, pp. 131f.; typical of many others: Delbrück 1985, pp. 253f.

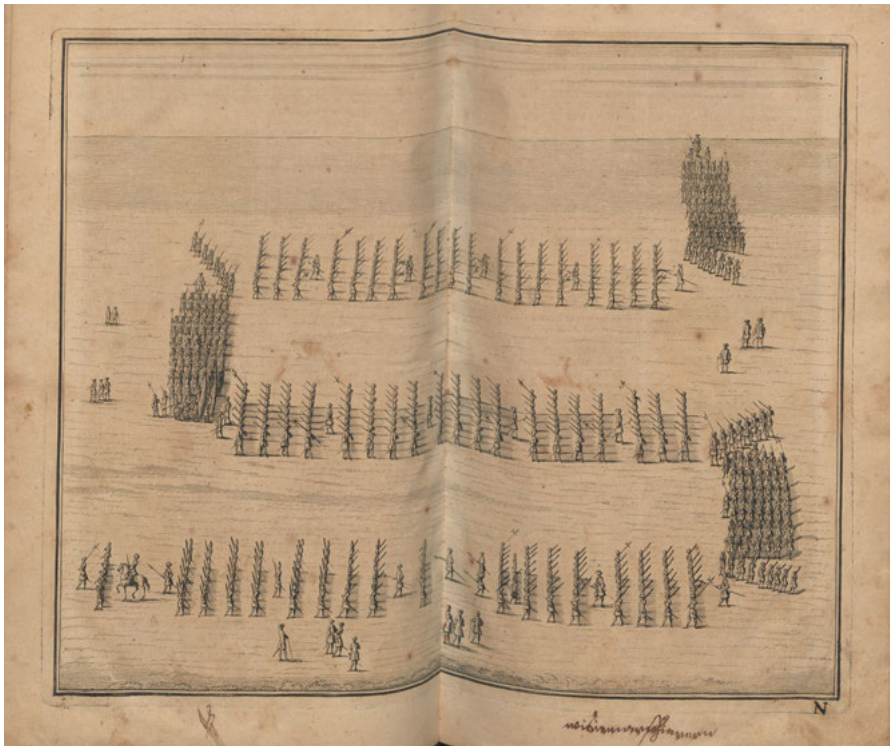

Fig. 5: Anonymous: Movements of troops, in: Hanns Friedrich von Fleming: Der vollkommene teutsche Soldat [...] Leipzig: Johann Christian Martini, 1726, Part Three, Ninth Chapter, ETH Zurich, Sign.: Rar 9315.

> The first thing in drill must be to train a fellow and give him the air of a soldier, so that the peasant comes out of him [...]: How to hold his head, namely, not to let it hang, not to lower his eyes, but rather holding the musket with his head upright, looking over his right shoulder at his right hand [...] That a fellow stand stiffly on his feet and not with his knees bent, also feet together, with approximately a span's length distance to the next soldier. That a fellow hold his body straight up, not bending back and sticking out his belly, but with his chest out and pulling in his back.[25]

The color and cut of uniforms is minutely described (a uniform the king shared with his soldiers, contrary to tradition): the short vest and tight-fitting hose, the gold and silver braid and pompoms, the brass drums and tall, gleaming grenadier hats, the beards and powdered wigs – nothing was left to chance right down to the correct sit of the knee straps (Fig. 9).

25 Reglement, pp. 39f.

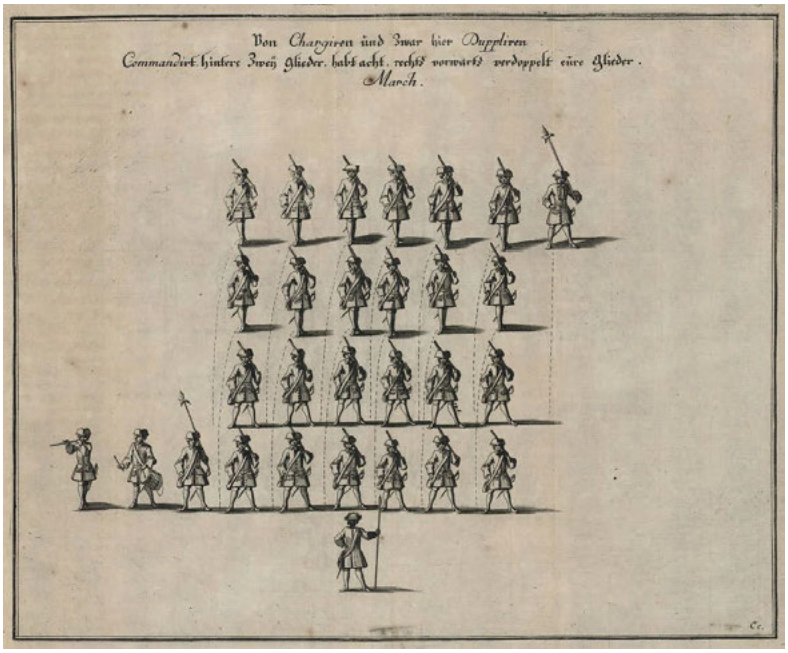

Fig. 6. Anonymous: Loading, in: Hanns Friedrich von Fleming: Der vollkommene teutsche Soldat [...], Leipzig: Johann Christian Martini, 1726, Part Three, Chapter Sixteen, Opole, Wojewódzka Biblioteka Publiczna w Opolu, Sign.: 1653 st.

Once the individual elements were standardized, the soldiers needed to learn to line up an exact distance from one another and move as quickly as possible and with complete, synchronous symmetry according to a strict choreography dictated by their weapons. As the regulations state, they had to learn "to conform to their musket,"[26] i.e., to make themselves and their weapon into a perfectly tuned hybrid body. Man and weapon "were fused into a shooting automaton whose hardwired mechanism went into action on command."[27] The rhythm for the entire operation was laid down by the army drummer, but even more by the soldiers' regular, loud foot stamping and striking their metal ammunition pouches. Otherwise, complete silence was to be maintained. According to the regulations, the series of movements was to become so ingrained that it could never be forgotten. Again and again, it was stressed that all must take place "still as a mouse," "swiftly," "ramrod straight," "with the greatest accuracy," and "as still as wood."[28] In

26 Reglement, p. 225.
27 Bröckling 1997, p. 71.
28 Reglement, passim.

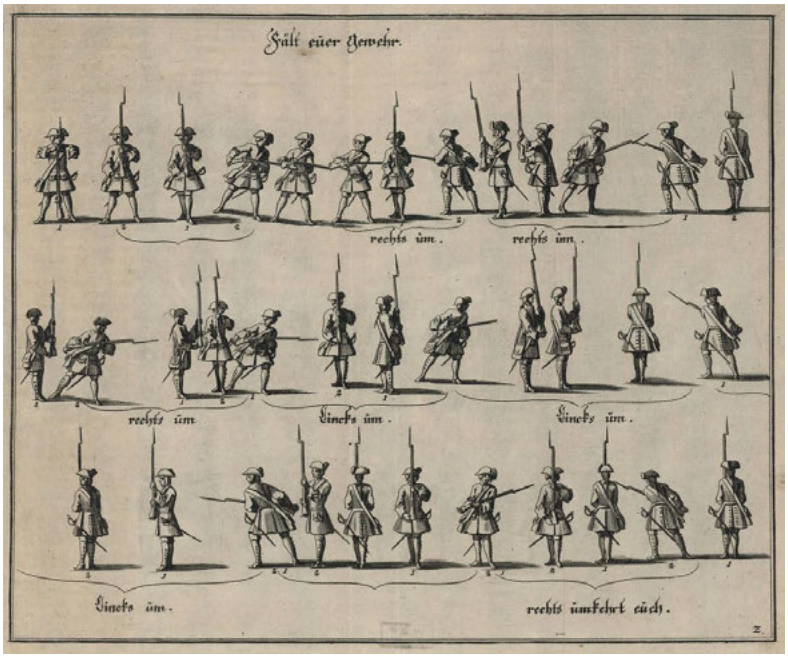

Fig. 7. Anonymous: Preparing for a bayonet charge, in: Hanns Friedrich von Fleming: Der vollkommene teutsche Soldat [...], Leipzig: Johann Christian Martini, 1726, Part Three, Chapter 16, Opole, Wojewódzka Biblioteka Publiczna w Opolu, Sign.: 1653 st.

the end, the entire performance should go off nearly automatically and almost without verbal commands from the officers.

What is almost entirely absent from the Prussian *Regulations* of 1726, however, is war itself. Of its 642 pages, a total of six are devoted to "orders, when the army must do battle with an enemy," namely, "with shouldered muskets, flying colors, and martial music."[29] There is even enough room on those six pages to mention officers' "equally clean saddle pads and equally clean equipment."[30] There is, however, a certain regret that "charging in battle cannot happen as accurately as in drilling,"

> nevertheless, no unit may fire before its turn comes, so that the battalions keep up continuous fire [...]. In action, everything must be done in the greatest silence [...]. Until the battle has ended, no soldier may step out of his rank, plunder, take clothes from the dead or wounded, or search the same.[31]

29 Reglement, pp. 358–364.
30 Reglement, pp. 359f.
31 Reglement, pp. 360f.

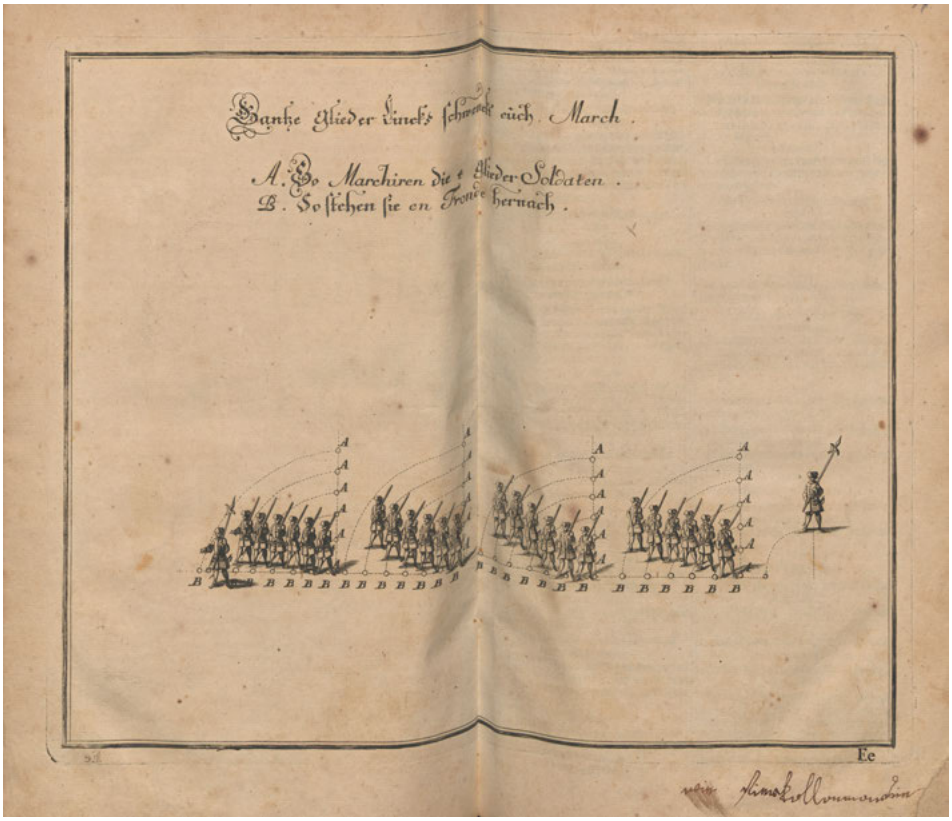

Fig. 8. Anonymous: Marching, in: Hanns Friedrich von Fleming: Der vollkommene teutsche Soldat [...], Leipzig: Johann Christian Martini, 1726, Part three, Chapter 17. ETH Zurich, Sign.: Rar 9315.

All noise (!) and "confusion" was to be avoided, no one could step out of his rank or push forward. What the regulations have to say about battle was obviously not suited to contend with chaos and actual violence in the field.[32]

Prussian historians of the 19th and 20th centuries had some difficulty substantiating the military usefulness of the innumerable "delicate" movements and difficult manipulations called for in the regulations; some even expressed cautious skepticism. A history of the Royal Prussian Army written in 1928 pointed out that such maneuvers were "unhelpful and time-consuming,"[33] and even the editor of a 1968 facsimile reprint

32 Füssel / Sikora 2014; Füssel 2015.
33 Jany 1967, p. 621.

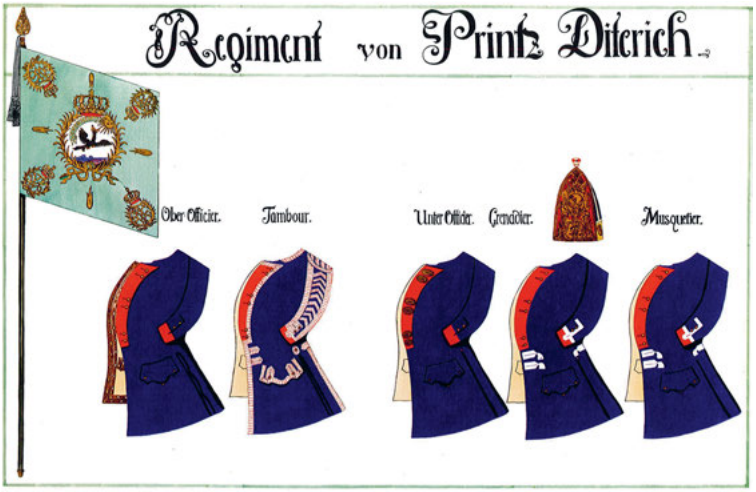

Fig. 9. The Regiment of Prince Diterich, anonymous color drawing, 1729. In: Fritz-Günther Melzner (ed.): Die Dessauer Spezifikation von 1737, Osnabrück 1970.

of the regulations concedes their "ballast of over-complicated manipulations."[34] They did indeed slow down the process of loading instead of speeding it up. That is especially true of the rhythmically synchronized striking of the ammunition pouch that was a standard accompaniment to the loading process. The point, however, was not accuracy of targeting but speed and synchronicity; the salvoes were supposed to sound like a single shot.[35] Also impractical in battle were the heavy brass drums[36] and the colorful, elaborately decorative uniforms that had become common since the end of the 17th century, especially the tall Prussian grenadiers' caps. The complicated "evolutions" in which the various units had to regroup according to height after a march were also a hindrance in the field. Finally, the Prussian king's obsessive fixation on the height and comeliness of his soldiers was difficult to justify under the criterion of expediency, and much argumentative effort was expended to prove that their unusual size produced the "greatest power in battle" and "superlative combative value."[37] The argument was first

34 Reglement, p. XLIII.

35 Bröckling 1997, p. 72.

36 Already as crown prince, Frederick William insisted on introducing exclusive use of drums made of gleaming brass rather than wood, which his war council sought to avoid, since they were both expensive and too heavy. The heavier drums were then an excuse to assign only large, strong men as drummers; cf. Hinrichs 1941, p. 364.

37 E.g.: Legendäre "lange Kerls," pp. XXI, XXVI and XLVI.

that their size intimidated the enemy, and second that one needed especially long arms to use the ramrod while loading the long-barreled muskets. The weapons' construction did in fact dictate the soldiers' movements, but on the other hand, the geometric beauty of the entire enterprise influenced the structure of the weapons. Especially long muskets with a straight stock were preferred in order to emphasize the vertical symmetry of the body of troops. Short-barreled rifles as used in hunting would have been more accurate.[38] Soldiers' height was "only good for the eye," as contemporary critics noted.[39]

Yet for nationalistic German historians of Prussia, it was (and is) simply unthinkable that the king's preference for "lange Kerls" – tall (and also handsome) fellows – could have been "nothing but a whim."[40] According to the master narrative already promulgated by Frederick the Great himself, it was the perfectly drilled troops that established Prussia's status as a great power. But more recent military historians have shown persuasively the extent to which this version of the art of war was increasingly dysfunctional in actual war. Armies were becoming more and more perfect, but at the same time more and more vulnerable. Whenever battalions stood facing one another in lines several kilometers long and without cover on completely open ground, as a rule a third of the soldiers were killed or wounded, however not because of the dangerous precision of the perfectly drilled sequence of loading or the continuous, synchronized salvoes. It has been demonstrated that in fact, most soldiers died in the battles of the 18th century not from bullet wounds but either from artillery fire or the bayonet thrusts and blows in the chaos of hand-to-hand combat.[41] This was why combat on an open field was avoided whenever possible. The idea of a decisive battle is also misleading; in fact, very few campaigns were decided by battles.

Something else was at stake in the production of an army as an automaton-like collective body. It was the internal logic of certain politico-aesthetic ideals that asserted themselves and developed their social dynamic, quasi behind the backs of the human participants. As a completely symmetrical, harmoniously ordered body set in motion by the single word of an individual, the drilled troops seemed the epitome of aesthetic perfection as well as sovereign omnipotence. Pars pro toto, they symbolized and anticipated a perfectly disciplined society of subjects, which in reality of course never existed anywhere.[42] "If absolutism was ever complete reality anywhere, it was on the parade ground."[43] In other words, armies had become living fantasies of political

38 Luh 2004, p. 230.

39 E.g., Mauvillon and Guibert according to Luh 2004, pp. 196f.; cf. Deflers 2020.

40 E.g., even Rohrschneider 2008, pp. 61f. ("again and again dismissed as nothing but a whim"); this tendency is also present in a recent biography of the king: Göse 2020.

41 Extensively in Luh 2004; also Birk 2011.

42 Cf. Kroener / Pröve 1996; Pröve / Kroener / Strauß 2010.

43 Thus in Sikora 2008, p. 166. Cf. the concept of "analogous violence" in the sense of Riekenberg 2019, pp. 56f.

omnipotence. Potentates exhibited them for one another in order to "make an éclat." The formation and equipping of the troops served not so much the 'art of war' as the representation of sovereignty. In terms of the praxeological model of the Collaborative Research Center, a redeployment of functional strategy took place.

5. The Army as an Object of Aesthetic Practice, 2: Collecting and Exhibiting

This leads us to the second form of aesthetic practice, the practice of collecting and exhibiting that corresponds exactly to the logic of repurposing the armies. In this case, Frederick William I seems to me an extreme special case. I have described above how he collected young, handsome, well-built, healthy, and above all, tall men for the royal regiment he exercised in person. In doing so, he was following a pattern of class-based behavior to the extent that collecting was a widespread practice among the rulers of the time. But what a cabinet of curiosities, a porcelain collection, a menagerie, or a picture gallery were for other monarchs, the royal grenadier regiment in Potsdam was for him.[44] Contemporaries were already making this comparison; at the sight of the royal regiment, one visitor spoke of a "great cabinet [...] where an inquisitive king has produced a very special collection of extraordinarily tall people from all parts of the world."[45]

The gems of his collection enjoyed numerous privileges; he had their portraits painted (Fig. 10) and hung in his palace. When they died, he had some dissected and their skeletons preserved.[46] In correspondence with intimate friends, he sometimes called his giant soldiers not only his "blue children," but according to context spoke of them as "rarities," "curiosities," "wares," and even "human flesh" or "white Moors."[47] Despite his legendary miserliness, he spent copiously on his collection, including for genuine Africans whom he purchased and employed as fifers and drummers.[48] Tall grenadiers were also the currency that one could exchange for whatever one wanted from him – offices and privileges, titles and honors. He even exchanged the legendary Amber Room for a couple of Russian giants. For the acquisition of additions to his collection, he was known to use systematic violence and took into account serious conflicts with neighboring princes. Preoccupation with his collection – constantly new arrangements

44 Sophie von Hannover: Briefwechsel, p. 267: "He was told that the king [Frederick William I] cared nothing for his beautiful porcelain; he said he would give him many grenadiers for that and for his lovely curiosities and paintings."

45 Bielfeld: Freundschaftliche Briefe, p. 77.

46 Berliner Zeitungen, pp. 110f., 120, 123, 201 and passim.

47 Legendäre "lange Kerls," pp. XXVII, 118–120 and 301f.

48 Cf. in general Theilig 2013; Bevilacqua 2021.

Fig. 10. Johann Christof Merck: Schwerid Rediwanoff of Moscow, from the Red Household Battalion of the Giant Guards of Frederick William I of Prussia, 1718–1719, oil on canvas, 274 × 110 cm. Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Inv. No. Kg 54/292.

and decorations, enhancements and increases, inspections, exercises, and maneuvers, but also parades and displays – was his favorite activity to which he devoted the greatest part of his time.[49]

With his peculiar collecting habits and personal drilling of beautiful tall men into a perfect collective body, Frederick William exceeded the bounds of the usual behavior of his peers. My thesis is that this idiosyncratic passion constitutes the key to the monarch's entire politics (which is not at issue here). The spectrum of reactions from outside observers ranged from incomprehension and disconcertment to amusement and astonished admiration. One observer enthused about the troops and their uniforms, "[...] so neat, so dainty, and so well fitting that one can see nothing more beautiful. No other people compares to the natural stature and noble appearance of the Prussians."[50] Another was "almost beside himself" with astonishment at the first sight of the Prussian troops on parade, but then found the whole thing to be rather monstrous, "more wonderful than beautiful."[51] Significantly, contemporaries were puzzled about what the king planned to do with his wonderfully trained troops, and on which battlefield he intended to intervene.[52] They simply could not imagine that he had no such plans at all.

The phenomenology of collecting distinguishes between quantitative, economic and qualitative, aesthetic collections.[53] In the former, the point is sheer accumulation of many objects of a certain kind; in the latter, it is the collection of individual objects distinguished by the minutest of differences, so that duplicates are worthless. Accumulative collecting only defers the use or consumption of things. Aesthetic collecting, on the other hand, is independent of the economic functions of use or consumption and does not aim for either. "All collecting is conservative," although "'at first and usually' it appears in its tarnished, 'inauthentic' namely, economic version." But "emancipation from economic subservience of gathering and keeping together" is an inherent tendency in all collecting.[54] That is an accurate description of Frederick William's practice as a collector. He crossed the threshold from accumulative to aesthetic collecting. While other rulers also treated their armies as aesthetic objects to a certain extent, they were still ready to be deployed at some time or other. Only Frederick William's army was detached from its original purpose. Its hugely increased personnel were intended not to be deployed at all, if possible. All the more reason why the function of

49 Cf., e.g., Berliner Zeitungen, p. 201; numerous details in Kloosterhuis 2011.
50 Loen: Schrifften, p. 23.
51 Bielfeld: Freundschaftliche Briefe, pp. 60, 75.
52 E.g., Berliner Zeitungen, pp. 95, 584, 643.
53 Sommer 2014, p. 113.
54 Sommer 2014, p. 115.

being used and consumed was overshadowed by the goal of demonstrating sovereign omnipotence.

Thus the *raison d'être* of the collection was to display it to his fellow rulers and other nobility. In all their details, his infantry regulations were calculated to produce a theatrical effect. To that extent, Prussian *ars militaris* followed court logic, which was a theatrical logic that essentially rested on the difference between what occurred on the stage and what occurred backstage. Frederick William placed great value on making the tedious work on the military collective body invisible. Non-participants were forbidden under threat of punishment to watch troops exercising. And the script for the performance – the drill book that each officer was issued against receipt and was required to read regularly – was treated like a state secret. Copies that were no longer needed had to be destroyed. How well that functioned is shown by the fact that despite their widespread issue, there are almost no surviving copies. An officer who lost, loaned out, or "communicated" his drill book to an outsider was punished; it was not regarded as a trivial offense but punished by being dishonorably discharged and imprisoned.[55] The marvel of the drilled troops had to appear on the public stage as a perfect product. Great reviews were court spectacles to which the king's fellow rulers were invited. Afterwards, they were made public to the general courtly audience by a specific commemorative practice. Frederick William had a veritable monster of a medal – over thirteen centimeters in diameter – struck to commemorate the gigantic military review of 1728, corresponding to the uncontested immensity of the Prussian army (Fig. 11). In the ubiquitous aesthetic competition of European potentates, Frederick William specialized in a single discipline, the *ars militaris*, to outshine all his competitors.

The metaphors used by contemporary observers to describe the troops of the Prussian king are revealing, be they the imperial field marshal Seckendorff or the famous war hero Prince Eugene of Savoy. Like Frederick William's grandmother Sophie von Hannover, they all spoke of his soldiers as "playthings."[56] They were described as dolls, clockwork toys, a perfect machine, but also as a Punch-and-Judy show.[57] What made the army into a sort of windup toy (for which 18th-century courtiers had a great weakness) was already obvious to contemporaries: the combination of mechanical automatism, aesthetic perfection, and purposelessness. Frederick William carried the contemporary aestheticization of the army to its furthest extreme.

The French Revolution, as we know, left nothing unchanged – neither war nor art, to say nothing of politics. It transformed the entire coordinate system of politics, the military, art, and science. Geometrically choreographed troops proved to be resistant

55 Reglement, pp. 637–639.

56 Sophie von Hannover: Briefwechsel, p. 239.

57 Seckendorff: Journal secret, p. 29 ("punch-and-judy show in the army"); cf. also the disparaging judgment of the French ambassador, Deflers 2020.

Fig. 11. Friedrich Eberhard Marl: Large medal to commemorate the miliary review of Frederick William I, 1728, obverse: bust of Frederick William I facing right, reverse: *Pro Deo et Milite*, troops on parade, silver, diameter: 120 mm. Berlin, Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Ident. No. 18202057.

to reform; the military automaton failed the practical test of the wars of revolution.[58] Clausewitz no longer understood the art of war as the technical production of a perfect body of troops but as the science of commanders' correct decisions. Not by accident at about the same time, the emergence of the modern concept of art – i. e., the separation of art from engineering – had the effect of denying an aesthetic quality to the military. All that remained was the Prussian goosestep.

58 Kunisch 1990.

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