



Introduction: Mobilising Resources for the Army and Navy in the Eighteenth-Century Spanish Empire: Comparative, Transnational and Imperial Dimensions

Pepijn Brandon , Sergio Solbes Ferri & Iván Valdez-Bubnov

To cite this article: Pepijn Brandon , Sergio Solbes Ferri & Iván Valdez-Bubnov (2021) Introduction: Mobilising Resources for the Army and Navy in the Eighteenth-Century Spanish Empire: Comparative, Transnational and Imperial Dimensions, War & Society, 40:1, 1-8, DOI: [10.1080/07292473.2021.1860318](https://doi.org/10.1080/07292473.2021.1860318)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07292473.2021.1860318>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 04 Jan 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 337



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Introduction: Mobilising Resources for the Army and Navy in the Eighteenth-Century Spanish Empire: Comparative, Transnational and Imperial Dimensions

PEPIJN BRANDON^{a,b}, SERGIO SOLBES FERRI^c AND IVÁN VALDEZ-BUBNOV^d

^a*International Institute of Social History, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, the Netherlands*

^b*Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, the Netherlands*

^c*Departamento de Ciencias Históricas, Research Institute of Text Analysis and Application, Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain*

^d*Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Ciudad de México, Mexico*

The subject of this special issue is the relationship between the material demands of warfare and the political and administrative development of the Spanish imperial system during the long eighteenth century. Its purpose is to provide a transnational and comparative perspective on the methods employed by the Spanish monarchy to mobilise resources for war, emphasising the international, imperial and inter-regional connections that underpinned Spain's military and naval efforts. These methods implied specific types of involvement between the crown and the regional productive elites and were directly related to the capacity of the latter to mobilise resources and administer production processes. They were varied, ranging from total state administration of capital, labour and productive processes to an almost complete and relatively independent involvement of the empire's entrepreneurial elites, in Europe, America and Asia. The introduction by the guest editors positions the four contributions to this special issue within the wider context of the historiography on the mobilisation of resources for war. In recent years, scholars in this field have started to shift their attention from a primary focus on the development of 'fiscal-military' and 'fiscal-naval' arrangements that provided the financial backbone of states' warring activities, to the wider

economic and social networks involved in supplying, recruiting, building and maintaining armies and navies. As the introduction argues, these networks, underpinning the emergence of European national states, were always inherently transnational.

KEYWORDS war, state formation, Spanish Empire, fiscal-military state, contractor state

Contracting for war

The question how early modern rulers mobilised the vast amounts of resources required for their armies and navies has long been one of the core themes driving research on the history of states and state formation. A long line of historiography has debated how European states came to subjugate the independently acting military entrepreneurs — mercenaries, privateers, power brokers — or integrate their activities into the ever more elaborate bureaucratic arrangements of the central state, only to conclude that they did so hesitatingly, with great difficulty, and imperfectly at best.¹ The seventeenth and eighteenth century saw considerable refinement in the instruments of statecraft, most importantly in terms of fiscal-military arrangements that allowed states to expand their armies and fleets vastly. Nevertheless the increasingly global scale of European great power conflict, as well as the strengthening of internationally operating business and financial networks that came with accelerating capitalist development, tended to increase rather than decrease the reliance of states on private business in the organisation of warfare. In recent years, many scholars have therefore started to expand their attention from a primary focus on the development of ‘fiscal-military’ and ‘fiscal-naval’ arrangements that provided the financial backbone of the state’s warring activities, to the wider economic and social networks involved in supplying, recruiting, building and maintaining armies and navies, expressed in the notion of the ‘contractor state’.² The interest in the relationship between the state and its myriad network of military and naval (sub) contractors is in no way a challenge to the older and still fecund

¹ Werner Sombart, *Krieg und Kapitalismus* (München: Duncker & Humblot, 1913); Fritz Redlich, *The German Military Enterpriser and His Workforce: A study in European Economic and Social History*. 2 vols. (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GmbH, 1964–1965); John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); David Parrott, *The Business of War: Military Enterprise and Military Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). For a recent evaluation of the current state of this debate: Rafael Torres-Sánchez, Pepijn Brandon and Marjolein 't Hart, ‘War and Economy. Rediscovering the Eighteenth-Century Military Entrepreneur,’ *Business History* 60:1 (2018), 4–22.

² Roger Knight and Martin Wilcox, *Sustaining the Fleet, 1793–1815: War, the British Navy and the Contractor State* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010); Richard Harding and Sergio Solbes Ferri (eds), *The Contractor State and its Implications (1659–1815)* (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 2012); H.V. Bowen, ‘Round Table: The Contractor State, c. 1650–1815,’ *International Journal for Maritime History* XXV:1 (2013): 239–274; Rafael Torres Sánchez, *Military Entrepreneurs and the Spanish Contractor State in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

research agenda of the fiscal-military state. Rather, it supplements it by stressing that the rise of the fiscal-military state created new opportunities for, and itself to a significant extent relied upon, the operation of private contractors.³

The subject of this special issue is the relationship between the material demands of warfare and the political and administrative development of the Spanish imperial system during the long eighteenth century. Its purpose is to provide internationally comparative, transnational and imperial perspectives on the methods employed by the Spanish monarchy to mobilise resources for war, emphasising the international, imperial and inter-regional connections that underpinned Spain's military and naval efforts. The need to understand the process of state formation in transnational terms is firmly embedded in the historiography, whether by emphasizing the importance of international conflict as a *driver* of state formation, the riches drawn from imperial expansion as *foundation* or *aim* of the strengthening of European state, or by outlining the transnational and trans-imperial networks that *enabled* the increase in warring capacities. As Bartolomé Yun-Casalilla emphasises,

the formation and functioning of fiscal states was everywhere strongly linked to transnational forces, and international financial systems also became steadily more important. Fiscal systems were basically 'national' in character, but often depended upon international financial networks.⁴

The significance of international networks might be most visible in the case of banking and government loans, but it was hardly of less weight when it came to the acquisition of vital military supplies, from wood and hemp for building warships to the international arms trade. Nevertheless, it remains true that much of the existing literature on military contracting focuses on the (often fraught) relationship between states and contractors from within their own borders. Indeed, states often at least formally preferred trading with their own subjects as they were deemed more loyal, easier to control or easier to cajole into doing the state's bidding.⁵ As this special issue makes clear, however, even where the state had a strong ideological predilection in this direction, the reality of the organisation of war often militated against official policies. The inability to substitute for transnational supply lines, the highly mediated way in which the power of the central state manifested itself in the context of overseas colonies or on far-away theatres of war, and a context of permanent international competition, comparison and emulation always

³ The relationship between the rise of fiscal militarism and private enterprise is explored in the special issue edited by Marjolein 't Hart, Pepijn Brandon and Rafael Torres Sánchez, 'War, Taxes and Finance in the Long Eighteenth Century,' *Financial History Review* 25:1 (2018). Examples of the continued vitality of research into the fiscal military state can be seen in Bartolomé Yun-Casalilla and Patrick K. O'Brien (eds.), *The Rise of Fiscal States: A Global History, 1500–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Aaron Graham and Patrick Walsh, *The British Fiscal-Military States, c. 1660–1783* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); and Svante Norrhem and Erik Thomson, *Subsidies, Diplomacy and State Formation in Europe, 1494–1789* (Lund: Lund University Press, 2020).

⁴ Bartolomé Yun-Casalilla, 'Introduction: The Rise of the Fiscal State in Eurasia from a Global, Comparative and Transnational Perspective', in *The Rise of Fiscal States: A Global History, 1500–1914*, ed. by Bartolomé Yun-Casalilla and Patrick K. O'Brien, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 19.

⁵ Torres-Sánchez, *Military Entrepreneurs*, Chapter 4.

impinged on early modern rulers. With its stark contradiction between a professed mercantilism based on local preferentialism and trade monopolies on the one hand and its deep dependence on international trading networks due to the weakness of the home economy on the other,⁶ the early modern Spanish state lends itself particularly well for examining the tensions between the local/domestic and the global/transnational/imperial in the mobilisation of resources for war.

The Spanish imperial state in the long eighteenth century

International comparisons often stress the differences between the more open and market-oriented solutions preferred by Northern European states, particularly England and the Dutch Republic, and the more monopolistic, state-controlled practices pursued by the Habsburg and Bourbon monarchies. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that even the early modern Spanish state, which is often held up as an example of 'rigid' and 'failed' monarchical strategies for resource mobilisation, went through many shifts in its contracting strategies in order to respond to international military and naval challenges.⁷ Especially in an imperial context, organising the mobilisation of resources for warfare required complex negotiations between the crown and local elites to resolve perennial financial and supply problems. The military needs created by maintaining a global empire in conditions of intense competition between European powers, combined with the comparative weakness of the home economy, forced the Spanish monarchy to face many of the same dilemmas as their European competitors, but in much sharper form. Examining the underlying causes for and the long-term successes and failures in the changes between more state-controlled and more market-oriented strategies in the Spanish Empire's long eighteenth century thus becomes an interesting case study for the problems faced by all early modern empires.

As many authors have already emphasised, the reforms introduced by the Bourbon monarchy managed to end the financial deadlock that had hampered Habsburg military organisation for much of the seventeenth century. A new fiscal-military regime thus underlay the various experiments to put military contracting on a new footing that are examined in this special issue. In the words of Juan Gelabert:

In comparison with the dispersed system of the seventeenth century, with control split between the Council of Finance and the commission of the Cortes, the Council of Finance was now firmly in control ... The designation of these revenues, the so-called 'provincial rents' (*rentas provinciales*), attests to the desire to achieve comprehensiveness where formerly there had been fragmentation.⁸

⁶ For example, Klemens Kaps, 'Small but Powerful: Networking Strategies and the Trade Business of Habsburg-Italian Merchants in Cadiz in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century,' *European Review of History/Revue européenne d'histoire* 23:3 (2016), 427–55.

⁷ On the many shifts in state policy for resource mobilisation: Rafael Torres-Sánchez, 'Administración o asiento. La política estatal de suministros militares en la monarquía Española del siglo XVIII,' *Studia historica. Historia moderna* 35 (2013), 159–99.

⁸ Juan Gelabert, 'Castile, 1504–1808,' in *The Rise of the Fiscal State in Europe c. 1200–1815*, ed. by Richard Bonney, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 231. For a more comprehensive overview of

As is invariably the case in the history of European state formation, these reforms were borne out of emergency. The Bourbon monarchy had inherited a trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific Empire from its Habsburg predecessors that had come under increasing pressure from Spain's Northern Atlantic maritime competitors. Much more than was the case with these competing powers, the Spanish crown sharply tacked between an ideal of complete state control over the mobilisation of military resources (known as *administración directa*), contracting out specific tasks to a small circle of preferred entrepreneurs close to the crown through *asientos*, or full reliance on (international) market solutions. Each of these solutions depended on a reconfiguration of relations between the crown and regional elites and were dependent on the capacity of the latter to mobilise resources and administer production processes. Experiments ranged from total state administration of capital, labour and productive processes to an almost complete and relatively independent involvement of the empire's entrepreneurial elites, in Europe, America and Asia. The tasks entrusted to military entrepreneurs were extremely complex and required not only a high degree of interaction between the administrative infrastructure of the state and regional private initiative, but also an effective capacity for social mobilisation based on political consensus and ideological support for the policies followed by the crown. Moreover, they also required access to international markets, directly linking the military and naval efforts of the Spanish monarchy to increasingly globalised trade networks.⁹

This special issue

This special issue originates in the long-term cooperation of the guest editors and several of the authors in the international research group *Imperial Network/Contractor State Group*, which has organised international discussions on the relationship between states and markets in the organisation of warfare for more than a decade. The articles brought together here were first presented in preliminary form at the XVIIIth World Economic History Congress, held at MIT in the summer of 2018. The four articles included in this special issue each in their own way lay bare the intricacies of the shifts between the different types of solutions to the supply problem with which the Bourbon state experimented and the extent to which these shifts were shaped by international factors. Rafael Torres-Sánchez shows how underneath the failure of Spanish officials to live up to their professed ideal of self-sufficiency in the procurement of military supplies lay a continuous clash between mercantilist prescripts and administrative pragmatism. Dependence on Dutch

fiscal developments: Anne Dubet and Sergio Solbes Ferri, *El rey, el ministro y el tesorero. El gobierno de la Real Hacienda en el siglo XVIII español* (Madrid: Marcial Pons Historia, 2019).

⁹ A wider exploration of these themes can be found in Ivan Valdez-Bubnov, Sergio Solbes Ferri and Pepijn Brandon (eds), *Redes empresariales y administración estatal: movilización de recursos y producción de materiales estratégicos en el mundo hispánico durante el largo siglo XVIII* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2020).

trading networks for the acquisition of strategic goods such as timber from the Baltic regions repeatedly drove the Spanish crown back into the arms of private merchants. The need to secure building materials for the fleet at relatively low costs in practice proved to be more important than long-term plans to ensure that the domestic economy would profit from the opportunities provided by military contracting. Self-sufficiency in the procurement of strategic goods was even harder to obtain in an imperial context, especially when the goods sought after were not indigenous to the overseas territories in question. Manuel Díaz-Ordóñez and Antonio José Rodríguez Hernández elucidate the problems involved by comparing Spanish and English attempts to introduce hemp production in their colonies in the Americas. The idea of transferring hemp production across continents was attractive because it would mean breaking the dependence of naval production in American shipyards on the importation of Russian hemp, with the high costs and long and vulnerable supply lines this entailed. Introducing hemp production to the Americas, however, proved not to be an easy feat, since it required extensive state planning and intervention in colonial agriculture. The limited successes of both empires in establishing secure bases of hemp supply in their American territories were only gained at high cost, involving geopolitical manoeuvring not entirely unlike the struggles that modern states engage in to diversify their oil supply.

While the first two articles are primarily engaged with procuring goods, Iván Valdez-Bubnov traces the arguably even greater number of strategic factors that went into the organisation of shipbuilding overseas by examining various attempts to move shipbuilding from the Philippines, where it took root very early in the process of imperial expansion, to different foreign maritime enclaves in the Southern Pacific. Valdez-Bubnov shows that while state officials often argued for the need of displacing the shipbuilding industry on technical grounds such as the quality of the available timber, in fact these debates were circumscribed by social conditions. On the one hand, the intensity of exploitation of local resources and the indigenous workforce led to large-scale rebelliousness. On the other hand, Spanish officials in the Philippines exploited problems in local shipbuilding to advance moving shipyards to localities where the potential for supervision by the Spanish crown was weaker, as a boon for their private involvement in intra-Asian trade. The latter point is a stark reminder that the problems faced by the state in mobilising the resources for (imperial) warfare were never simply organisational. For private merchants and state officials alike, engagement in the economy of military logistics also provided a stepping stone to power and profits in many other fields, often more for their own interests than for those of the central state.

Finally, Sergio Solbes Ferri and Eduard Martí Fraga bring us back to the Iberian Peninsula, by providing a broad assessment of the changing relations between the state, the military and the market as a result of the policy of the state to concentrate the supply of military uniforms into the *asiento general*. Like the other reforms studied in this special issue, the preference for unifying supply contracts into the hands of a smaller number of privileged merchants did not arise in a vacuum. In the case of the *asiento general*, French influence which in general was key to the direction of early Bourbon reforms was of great importance. Nevertheless, as the

authors show, the push towards monopoly policies did not simply correspond to ideals of institutional efficiency imported from abroad. Rather, it was part and parcel of a broader tug of war between institutions, commercial actors and regional elites. In the case of army uniforms, the *asiento general* replaced the system of the *gran masa* in which a compensation for the procurement of clothing was included in the army pay, and the acquisition of uniforms was arranged by officers in the military themselves. The article thus further underlines that the centralisation policies of the state that became possible as a result of successful fiscal-military reforms did not lead to the replacement of military entrepreneurship by bureaucratic arrangements, but more often led to the replacement of one form of military (sub)-contracting by another.

Military history of the type promoted by *War & Society* and likeminded journals has long escaped the parochialism traditionally associated with the field. The contributions in this special issue seek to further a comparative and long-term perspective on military contracting, with an emphasis on state-society relations that underpinned changes in military and naval policy of the Spanish Empire. In focusing on the wider comparative, transnational and imperial dimensions of the development of the contractor state, the articles gathered here add to the growing literature on military contracting in the context of early modern state formation and European expansion. Our attempt to study Spanish military contracting ‘from the outside in’ fits into the wider trend of trying to understand state formation as a process that inherently transcended national borders.

Funding

Work on this Special Issue and its introduction were supported by UNAM-PAPIIT IG400318: Redes empresariales y administración estatal: la producción de materiales estratégicos en el mundo hispánico como escenario de la globalización temprana, by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), Veni 275-53-015: Laboratories of Capitalism: Naval Shipyards in the Atlantic World as Centers of Innovation in Production, Administration and Labor Control (1720-1870), and through Ayudas a proyectos Puente de investigación de la ACIISI, CEI2018-5: Patrimonio Cultural Tangible e Intangible: Fortificaciones, Milicias y Ejército en la Historia de Canarias.

Notes on contributors

Pepijn Brandon is Assistant Professor of Economic and Social History at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, and Senior Researcher at the International Institute of Social History. He is the author of *War, Capital, and the Dutch State (1588–1795)* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015). He co-edited special issues on the impact of war on business and finance in the eighteenth century in *The Financial History Review* and *Business History*. He is a member of the Editorial Committee of the *International Review of Social History*. In 2020, he

served as the Erasmus Lecturer on the History and Civilization of the Netherlands and Flanders at Harvard University.

Sergio Solbes Ferri is Associate Professor of History and Economic Institutions at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (Spain) and member of the Research Institute of Text Analysis and Applications (IATEXT). His research focuses on public finance in the eighteenth century. He published widely on fiscal policies, the tobacco monopoly, state formation, the promotion of national economies, war and military contracts. His recent publications include *El rey, el ministro y el tesorero. El gobierno de la Real Hacienda en el siglo XVIII español* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2019, with Anne Dubet); *La diferencia insular. El modelo fiscal de Canarias en perspectiva histórica* (Valencia: Tirant lo Blanch, 2020, with Daniel Castillo Hidalgo).

Ivan Valdez-Bubnov is a full-time research fellow at the Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. His field of specialisation is the history of Spanish naval shipbuilding in the Age of Sail, and he teaches military and naval history and historiography at both graduate and undergraduate levels. His recent publications include ‘Comercio, guerra y tecnología: la construcción naval para la carrera de Filipinas (1577–1757)’, in *Comercio, guerra y finanzas en una época en transición (siglos XVII-XVIII)*, ed. J.A. Rodríguez Hernández (Valladolid: Castilla Ediciones, 2017) and ‘Piezas, toneladas, quintadas y arqueos en el Pacífico hispano. Fundamentos para una interpretación tecnológica de la construcción naval española en Asia durante los siglos XVII y XVIII’ in *Redes empresariales y administración estatal: la provisión de materiales estratégicos en el mundo hispánico durante el largo siglo XVIII*, eds. Ivan Valdez-Bubnov, Sergio Solbes and Pepijn Brandon (México: UNAM, 2020).

Correspondence to: Pepijn Brandon. Email: pepijn.brandon@iisg.nl; p.brandon@vu.nl