Sander Govaerts

*Armies and Ecosystems in Premodern Europe: The Meuse Region*

York: Arc Humanities Press, 2021

Sander Govaerts’ *Armies and Ecosystems in Premodern Europe: The Meuse Region, 1250–1850* is a valuable addition to an increasing bibliography addressing military influence on the environment. Several aspects of the book make it stand out. Its tight geographical focus allows meaningful analysis over an ambitious timeframe. It engages important debates in the history of warfare without losing ecosystems along the way. And it uses a wide range of sources, incorporating medieval materials as thoroughly as early modern ones. Each chapter provides thoughtful definitions of potentially amorphous terms, like region, ecology, soldier and biotic communities. Govaerts locates each term in a broad field of research that includes environmental and military history in French, Dutch, German and English. The five chapter topics – frontiers, fortifications, disturbances, policing and army health – do not always hold together cohesively in one overarching argument, but they do combine to create a vivid and multifaceted view of the ecological impacts of warfare in north-eastern Europe.

Govaerts’ timespan starts in the central Middle Ages and extends into the middle of the nineteenth century. This span allows him to explore continuities in warfare where many historians emphasise change. For example, Govaerts considers the ecological repercussions of the massive earthworks emerging in the face of heavier and heavier artillery. Using notarial and archaeobotanical sources, he considers both the short-lived nature of these earthworks if they were not maintained, and the microclimates created by star-shaped earthworks that allowed diverse plant species to thrive. He spends just as much time, however, with the continuing importance of medieval fortifications in areas around the Meuse considered either too forested for large armies moving heavy artillery or too hydrologically volatile for successful earthworks. As he argues, these medieval fortifications were effective against the majority of attacks, which were smaller-scale raids. Therefore he analyses the ecological impacts of stone walls, thorny hedges, ditches and moats. His chapter on army health explores the ecological impacts of the centuries-long continuity in Hippocratic-Galenic concepts of health. Here he focuses on increasingly large ‘biotic communities’ of soldiers and horses in the Meuse Region. He avoids a simple narrative based on progress in medical knowledge and instead finds that soldiers’ health was often worse in later centuries because of the increasing size of armies. More soldiers and horses meant more strain on food supplies and sanitation efforts.

The tight geographical focus on the Meuse Region gives Govaerts space for nuance and detail. He shares his clear understanding of this politically
and ecologically diverse region through maps, images and engaging specific examples. The reader gains insights into the ecological dangers of neutrality, for example, through Govaerts’ analysis of the Prince-Bishopric of Verdun. It became a place where soldiers could travel through the region and be hired by any political leader, causing soldiers’ increased presence to put strains on the roads, forests, food supplies and fords. The details that Govaerts includes create a lively picture of military activities in the Meuse Region and their ecological impact. He includes the creation of defensive canals and inundation regions, wide expanses for cavalry manoeuvres, and hedges and forests to slow invading cavalry. His literary and judicial sources allow him to include experiences of fishing, guard duty, travel, raids and sieges. While building his larger, more abstract argument, Govaerts never loses the physical sense of spring mud pulling soldiers’ shoes off.

Govaerts’ main argument eventually comes to an ambivalent conclusion. He gives many examples of military efforts creating protected spaces with relatively high species diversity, but he does not find evidence that this was a military priority. He makes the careful distinction that battles and sieges very rarely caused people to leave a town or cultivatable area permanently. And the active creation of ruins (so that enemies could not use the buildings) and the clearing of areas for manoeuvres created space for plant and animal species. Periods of active raiding or troop movement could even restore species, like the wolf, because it became difficult for hunters to move through defended forests. At the same time, he finds that soldiers’ behaviour and military activities often damaged environments directly and indirectly. The most devastating impacts were often indirect, such as deforestation caused by the need for wood for the production of gunpowder weapons and by people displaced by warfare. Overall, this book resists oversimplifying experiences in the Meuse Region. It pushes the reader to consider each claim from multiple perspectives while providing diverse evidence.

NICOLE ARCHAMBEAU

*Colorado State University*