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**Studies of European Mercenaries
(1350–1800) by Xu Erbin,
The Commercial Press, 2024.
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REVIEWED BY

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ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Han Yutong is an undergraduate student at Capital Normal University, affiliated with the Department of History Education in the School of History. Her research interests focus on the military history of Europe from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, with particular attention to the military histories of Italy, the German lands, Switzerland, and Scotland.

Studies of European Mercenaries (1350–1800),¹ authored by Xu Erbin—professor of European military-social history at Xiamen University—examines mercenaries as a lens for Europe’s socio-military transformations. A specialist in late medieval and early modern warfare-society dynamics, Xu’s prior works include *Military Revolution in a Changing Society: Military Innovation and Social Transformation in Europe from the 14th to 17th Centuries* (*Biandong shehui zhong de junshi geming: 14-17 shiji ouzhou de junshi gexin yu shehui biange* 变动社会中的军事革命: 14–17世纪欧洲的军事革新与社会变革).² His methodology integrates Western “new military history” frameworks to analyze how mercenary systems shaped broader societal changes.

The book’s intellectual context follows twentieth century shifts: James Harvey Robinson’s “new history,” which called for a more interdisciplinary approach to history, was later incorporated by the French Annales School’s structural analyses. Post-1950s, these paradigms catalyzed “new military history,” which reoriented focus from battlefield tactics to the relationship between war and society. While complementing, not replacing, traditional military history, this approach underpins Xu’s synthesis of macrostructural forces and micro-dynamics in mercenary studies.

Over the past three years, Chinese scholars have advanced European historical research through interdisciplinary methodologies and localized theoretical frameworks. Key works integrate political-cultural discourse analysis—exemplified by *The French Style: Political Culture of the Great Revolution’s* (*Falanxi fengge; da geming de zhengzhi wenhua* 法兰西风格:大革命的政治文化)³ systematic examination of revolutionary mentalities—and literary deconstruction, as seen in Liu Xiaoman’s “Reconstructing the Dark History of Europe in *The Phantom Companion*” (“*Youling lvban zhong heise ouzhoushi de chonggou*” 幽灵旅伴中黑色欧洲史的重构).⁴ which investigates European history through classical literature. These approaches explore themes like institutional evolution and ideological tensions, notably Qian Chengdan’s *Winds Rise and Clouds Soar: Qian Chengdan on the Rise of Great*

1 Xu Erbin 许二斌, *Ouzhou guyong bing yanjiu (1350–1800)* 欧洲雇佣兵研究(1350–1800) [Studies of European Mercenaries (1350–1800)] (Shangwu yin shuguan 商务印书馆, 2024).

2 Xu Erbin 许二斌, *Biandong shehui zhong de junshi geming: 14-17 shiji ouzhou de junshi gexin yu shehui biange* 变动社会中的军事革命: 14–17世纪欧洲的军事革新与社会变革 [Military Revolution in a Changing Society: Military Innovation and Social Transformation in Europe from the 14th to 17th Centuries] (Heilongjiang renmin chubanshe 黑龙江人民出版社, 2008).

3 Gao Yi 高毅, *Falanxi fengge; da geming de zhengzhi wenhua* 法兰西风格:大革命的政治文化 [The French Style: Political Culture of the Great Revolution] (Shanghai shudian chubanshe 上海书店出版社, 2024).

4 Liu, Xiaoman 刘晓蔓, “‘Youling lvban’ zhong heise ouzhoushi de chonggou” 幽灵旅伴中黑色欧洲史的重构 [Reconstructing the Dark History of Europe in “The Phantom Companion”], *Wenxue jiaoyu* 文学教育 no. 3 (2023): 106–109.

Powers (*fengqiyunfeiyang: Qian chengdan jiang daguo jueqi* 风起云飞扬:钱乘旦讲大国崛起),⁵ which comparatively traces the trajectories of nine major powers since the fifteenth century. Such scholarship innovatively fuses macro-philosophical inquiry with micro-case rigor, reshaping European historiography through critical dialogue with Western scholarship and academic pluralism.

While Western scholarship (e.g., Li Lanning) traces mercenaries' macro-historical trajectories, Chinese studies, though limited, offer distinct methodologies: Chen Zhiqiang's analysis of Byzantine "loss of control" and Xu Erbin's *Studies of European Mercenaries (1350–1800)*. The latter uses administrative archives to reveal institutional evolution between 1350–1800 in Europe. Together, they enrich historiography through localized cases and cross-era comparisons.

This book examines European mercenaries from the mid-fourteenth to late eighteenth century—a period of frequent warfare and social transformation across the continent. Adopting the framework of Philippe Contamine, French historian of the Middle Ages, which defines mercenaries as professional soldiers driven primarily by personal gain (rather than political loyalty), it outlines their historical context and analyzes key cases: free companies, Italian condottieri, military contractors, German landsknechts, Scottish overseas service, Swiss mercenaries, the Hesse-Kassel system, and German troops in the American Revolutionary War.⁶ Xu employs a dual micro- and macro-level analysis to build a case for the crucial role of mercenaries in history. This approach integrates the examination of mercenary demographics and dissection of specific, but typical, case studies, enabling comprehensive exploration of the mercenary phenomenon.

5 Qian Chengdan 钱乘旦, *Fengqiyunfeiyang: Qian chengdan jiang daguo jueqi* 风起云飞扬:钱乘旦讲大国崛起 [Winds Rise and Clouds Soar: Qian Chengdan on the Rise of Great Powers] (Beijing daxue chubanshe 北京大学出版社, 2024).

6 Philippe Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages*, trans. Michael Jones (Basil Blackwell, 1984), 99.

During Europe's transition era (1350–1800),⁷ frequent wars and the limits of the feudal system drove demand for mercenaries, sourced from materially or economically struggling regions. The structures of mercenary formations evolved from small bands to fifteenth-century contractors, later transitioning to state-leased units after the Thirty Years' War in the seventeenth century. Private recruitment was increasingly regulated from the sixteenth century, but was in decline by the 1800s due to conscription, moral stigmas against mercenaries, economic shifts, and state bans on the practice.

The author argues that mercenaries' societal impact transcended military utility: amplifying war's destructiveness, reshaping politics, accelerating social change, fostering regional ties, and mitigating population imbalances. The study stresses contextual historical evaluation over modern ethical judgments.

A key argument in the book challenges the famous view in Machiavelli's *The Prince*, that mercenaries are both useless and disloyal.⁸ Due to Machiavelli's influential status, many sources have accepted his position.⁹ He holds that mercenaries do not fight wholeheartedly, that their leaders harbor political ambitions, and that they ultimately betray their employers. Xu here critiques each of these claims: mercenaries do, in fact, fight earnestly. Machiavelli cites

7 Scholarship conventionally designates the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries as the “late medieval” period and the sixteenth–eighteenth centuries as the “early modern” era. While the year 1500 is a conventional divide, significant continuities persisted. Given the uninterrupted evolution of mercenary institutions, this study treats 1350–1800 as a coherent unit, adopting the term “transition era” for its analysis. Scholars diverge in conceptualizing this era's defining features, with some characterizing it as a shift from medieval to modern society, and others as a transition from a traditional agrarian to a modern industrial society. Academic consensus largely places the endpoint of this transition in the late eighteenth century, but views on its starting point vary considerably, ranging from the early sixteenth century back to the thirteenth. For key interpretations of this transition, see:

Zhu Xiaoyuan 朱晓远, *Ouzhou niepan: Guodu shiqi Ouzhou de fazhan gainian* 欧洲涅槃: 过度时期欧洲的发展概念 [European Nirvana: Developmental Concepts in Transitional Europe] (Xuelin chubanshe 学林出版社, 2002), 2–3; Hou Jianxin 侯建新, *Shehui zhuanxing shiqi de Xiyu yu Zhongguo* 社会转型时期的西欧与中国 [Western Europe and China during the Social Transition Period] (Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe 高等教育出版社, 2005), 1. For an overview of the scholarly debate on the period's inception, see Wang Qinrong 王勤榕, “Xiu cong fengjian shehui xiang ziben zhuyi guodu shiqi hunyin xingtai de ruogan bianhua” 西欧从封建社会向资本主义过渡时期婚姻形态的若干变化 [Changes in Marriage Patterns in Western Europe during the Feudal-to-Capitalist Transition], *Shijie lishi* 世界历史 4 (1996): 77–84; Zhu Xiaoyuan 朱晓远, *Ouzhou niepan: Guodu shiqi Ouzhou de fazhan gainian* 欧洲涅槃: 过度时期欧洲的发展概念 [European Nirvana: Developmental Concepts in Transitional Europe] (Xuelin chubanshe 学林出版社, 2002), 2–3; Hou Jianxin 侯建新, “Guanyu xiyu jindai shehui zhuanxing qishi niandai de xingguandian” 关于西欧近代社会转型起始年代的新观点 [New Perspectives on the Starting Date of Modern Social Transition in Western Europe], *Shijie lishi* 世界历史 4 (2014): 12–15.

8 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

9 The most frequently cited phrase regarding Swiss mercenaries is: “Point d'argent, point de Suisse” (No money, no Swiss). This line originates from *Les Plaideurs* (The Litigants), a 17th-century play by French dramatist Jean Racine. This serves as compelling evidence of the deep-rooted prejudice surrounding perceptions of mercenary loyalty in historical contexts.

mercenaries' preference for capturing rather than killing enemy combatants as evidence that they do not want wars to end. However, the author counters that this conclusion is unfounded. During the transition era, mercenaries developed a strong sense of collective identity and sympathy for one another. They would show mercy to fellow mercenaries who are on opposing sides of the conflict. Also, knights—who were a significant source of early mercenaries—also had a tradition of taking prisoners instead of killing enemies on the battlefield. Therefore, the author finds it illogical to conclude that mercenaries refused to fight seriously simply because they avoided killing. Unlike the popular scholarly work by Michael Mallett, *Mercenaries and Their Masters*,¹⁰ which focuses on Italian condottieri, Xu's work systematically compares mercenary systems across Europe, revealing transnational patterns of state-mercenary symbiosis. The Renaissance writer Francesco Guicciardini's contemporaneous account¹¹ corroborates Xu's view, noting that Florentine mercenaries "fought as fiercely as citizens when their pay was secured."¹²

Machiavelli's condemnation of mercenaries in *The Prince* stemmed from witnessing Florentine military defeats and condottieri betrayals, driving his advocacy for citizen militaries to unify Italy. His critique sidestepped employer contract breaches, relied on inaccurate casualty data, and reflected ideological bias rather than objective analysis.¹³

The book challenges military historian David Parrott's traditional timeline attributing mercenary decline to post-French Revolution fiscal-military states.¹⁴ Contrary to this paradigm, the book argues that while individually recruited mercenaries declined after the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, state-leased mercenary forces (e.g., German troops contracted by Britain) persisted until their viability eroded following the American Revolutionary War. This distinction refines the chronology of mercenarism's demise by decoupling two distinct institutional forms. By analyzing German mercenaries in the American Revolutionary War, Xu distinguishes two mid-seventeenth to late eighteenth-century categories: state-leased troops (government-contracted institutional units) and individually recruited soldiers (voluntary foreign enlistees). The study reveals state-leased mercenaries persisted beyond the French Revolution, but

10 Michael Mallett, *Mercenaries and Their Masters* (Pen & Sword Books, 2019).

11 Francesco Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, (Prentice Hall, 1984).

12 Xu Erbin, *Studies of European Mercenaries*, 41-42.

13 Ibid, 65-82.

14 This work challenges the established scholarly consensus that the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars marked the definitive turning point in the decline of mercenarism. Key studies representing this view see Janice E. Thomson "State Practices, International Norms, and the Decline of Mercenarism" *International Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (March 1990): 31, and Deborah Avant "From Mercenary to Citizen Armies: Explaining Change in the Practice of War" *International Organization* 54, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 43.

lost viability after the American Revolutionary War due to shifting geopolitical and economic dynamics. This reframes their decline as a gradual process tied to post-1776 institutional obsolescence, not abrupt post-Napoleonic collapse.

Xu's book pioneers systematic analyses of late medieval Italian mercenaries, introducing the "military contractor" concept (entrepreneurial commanders blending recruitment and battlefield roles) to explain their influence during Europe's transition (1350–1800).¹⁵ Additionally, the work fills gaps in studies of German Landsknecht which are lacking systemic overviews, Scottish overseas soldiers which have been limited to fragmented cases, Swiss mercenaries by reassessing origins and decline, and Hesse-Kassel troops (often campaign-specific). Through macro-micro integration, diverse sources, and global perspectives, it maps each group's development, management systems, and socio-military impacts, offering a cohesive framework for understanding mercenaries' transformative roles.

Besides examining the influence of European mercenaries within Europe itself, the book also pays special attention to mercenaries in the American Revolutionary War of Independence, particularly the German contingents. Although these troops have been studied extensively, their precise nature remains controversial. Some scholars such as Brady Crytzer, argue that the German troops in the American Revolutionary War were mercenaries.¹⁶ Other scholars, for example Maximilian Hake argue that the German troops in the American Revolutionary War were not mercenaries, as the soldiers were merely victims sold by German princes to Britain.¹⁷ Moreover, existing research typically focuses on the forces as a whole rather than on individual soldiers. By situating them in their historical context, Xu considers both their essential characteristics and their significance in European military history. The book contends that German units in the American Revolutionary War of Independence comprised voluntary and involuntary troops; those who enlisted willingly can be classified as mercenaries, while the conscripted were victims of coerced recruitment practices. Accordingly, the author supports the definition of mercenaries advocated by scholars such as Philippe Contamine, arguing that these German forces should be viewed as a form of government-leased mercenary force. Examining the case of German forces through a historical rather than modern legal lens, for example the contracts of the Hessians, provides a more nuanced understanding of early modern mercenaries.¹⁸ This perspective

15 Xu Erbin, *Studies of European Mercenaries (1350–1800)*, 267.

16 Brady J. Crytzer, *Hessians: Mercenaries, Rebel, and The War for British North America* (Westholme Publishing, 2015).

17 Maximilian Hake, *Deutsche Truppen im Amerikanischen Unabhängigkeitskrieg. Die "Hessians" als Söldner?* (Grin Verlag, 2018).

18 Xu Erbin, *Studies of European Mercenaries (1350–1800)*, 220-224.

rejects moralistic judgments, revealing through the institutional legitimacy of mercenaries within pre-modern state governance. Through such an approach, mercenaries emerge as contractual actors within historically specific systems; their loyalty founded on reciprocal obligations. Concurrently, it clarifies that their decline stemmed from structural transformations like conscription and nationalism, not inherent deficiencies. Such contextual analysis furnishes comparable frameworks for studying modern private military forces while challenging teleological narratives. By liberating scholarship from presentist biases, it offers historically grounded insights into warfare and sovereignty.

While earlier studies of mercenaries in Europe's transformative period remain fragmented focusing on specific eras, regions, or individuals, this book redefines them as a unified phenomenon tied to broader social change. Integrating macro-level analysis with micro-case studies, it establishes rigorous empirical links between mercenary systems and societal transformation.

The study's reliance on secondary sources and scarcity of primary administrative documents (e.g., state payrolls, treaties) limits analytical rigor, particularly for 1350–1600. While incorporating mercenary diaries and memoirs, their subjective nature risks bias without official records to balance perspectives. Critical gaps persist in economic contextualization—e.g., analysis of German Landsknechte wages lacks data on contemporary monetary systems and price conversions, undermining real-income conclusions. Additionally, the study relies exclusively on archival sources in English, French, and German, languages inadequate to comprehensively cover the diverse European regions under examination. Its episodic approach, linking landmark cases to trace mercenary evolution, sacrifices narrative continuity. Though valuable for framing broad trajectories, specialized studies remain essential to address inevitable omissions.