

**THE END OF THE ITALIAN MERCENARIES AND THE PRODUCTION OF
VIOLENCE**

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Abstract: Violence is pillar of all governments and states. It is necessary to protect their territory and enforce their will. However, the form violence used by such powers varies across history. This paper seeks to use the outlying example of the Italian Mercenaries to better understand the reasoning behind the choices governments make when it comes to the “production” of violence

INTRODUCTION

Niccolò Machiavelli, one of the most famed political philosophers had this to say about mercenaries, “With them ruin is assured, for they are completely united and completely under the command of others. Whereas, after they have been victorious mercenaries require more time and a better opportunity if they are to injure you, for they are not a single body of men and they have been brought together and paid by you. Any third party whom you might make their commander cannot immediately seize enough authority to harm you” (Machiavelli 2005, 47). He blamed them for Italy’s poor performance in the Italian Wars (Ibid, 43). However, something that survives as an institution for hundreds of years must have some use. Indeed, some have discovered a purpose to these mercenaries that this paper will take as exogenous (Leeson 2020). Instead this paper will endeavor to explain the Italian mercenaries’ poor performance in the Italian Wars and how they came to an end as an institution. This paper argues that the Italian mercenaries’ poor performance stems from a misuse of them by the Italian City states rather than an inherent issue with as an institution.

EXPLANATION OF THE *CONDOTTIERI*

As stated previously, central to the analysis of this paper is the Italian Mercenary, or *condottieri*. *Condottieri* were “self-employed private military contractors or small business owners engaged in the production of defense” (Hukil 2025, 65). In other words, they were private producers of defense. They were hired by the city states of Italy to serve as troops instead of more conventional forces. They were made up of foreigners (at least to the city state in question) and did not swear allegiance to a ruler who did not contract with them (Leeson 2020, 429). Central to the profession of a *condottieri* was the *condotte* or contract. As historian Michael Mallet explains, “The *condotte* was the contract signed between the condottiere and his

employer which arranged for the provision of a certain number of troops for a set period in return for payment primarily in cash” (2009, 79). Such forces were professionals, neither troops supplied by vassal lords, nor militias. To them war was just a trade not a sacred duty to defend their homeland. This is not to say they were completely devoid of morals of course, just that the nature of the profession was profit-driven not ideological in nature. Of course, it is important to note that we cannot categorize *condottieri* as purely private entities. They derived all their business from state-like entities that derived their authority and wealth primarily through aggressive violence (city states).

That leads to the next term that needs some clarification, the Italian city state. The term state brings with it a lot of baggage both in the fields of economics and political economy. Just the definition of state is a major point of discussion. Many use Max Weber’s definition of a compulsory monopoly on the use of force within a given territory (Weber 1978, 54). However, that definition has not been unanimously decided on and many have pointed out issues with it. Thus, it seems questions of the definition of the state are beyond the scope of this paper and that trying to narrow down a single definition will merely muddy this paper’s analysis rather than enhance it. Therefore, this paper will merely refer to the Italian states as “governments.” A government will be defined as merely a legitimate user of force. While this definition almost certainly has its fair share of problems it should suit the needs of this paper’s analysis. The question of what constitutes a state has no bearing on the fact that the Italian cities wielded aggressive force which was seen as legitimate at the time.

Despite their reputation as mercenaries the *condottieri* were truly trained and skilled at their profession. As Dr. Hukil pointed out, “The technicality of Italian warfighting methods is well-established in the literature and correspondence of the time, as war was increasingly

described as a science and treated as a serious field of study. Italian fencing masters published the most well-regarded and widely circulated fencing manuals of the Middle Ages” (2025, 72). This should come as no surprise. These mercenaries were specialists in their field. Unlike an army of conscripted civilians their livelihood has depended on their skills in combat for presumably years. Specialization leading to the cultivation of skills is among the oldest doctrines in the field of political economy. These men had their entire lives to devote to the craft of violence. Despite not being subject to normal market competition, they still had to compete against other mercenaries in the field of battle at the very least. Additionally, reputation was very important to a condottiere (ibid, 75), even if a city state’s government is not bound by the same rules as a consumer the rulers of such entities are still rational. Unless nepotism (or a similar bias) was the reason behind a certain company being hired, the rulers of a city state would have little reason to continue to pay a group of known incompetents for their service. Thus, the *condottieri* were incentivized to compete with one another to at least some extent.

The *condottieri* not only showed professionalism with how they interacted with their employers but how they interacted with each other. They did not see their mercenary adversaries as enemies to be destroyed, but more as competitors. They did not seem to harbor grudges against one another and there are many documented cases of them showing hospitality to prisoners of war. They did this because there was the possibility that today’s enemies could be tomorrow’s allies or employers. Therefore, it would be imprudent to deny an enemy hospitality of at least some kind. This made the *condottieri* unique even among fighting forces of the time (Hukil 2025, 74). Dr. Hans-Hermann Hoppe agreed with this assessment, arguing (regarding the *condottieri*) “When mercenaries became used as soldiers, wars likewise were mostly bloodless battles. The mercenaries were a bunch of adventurers, international men. They were not united

by any kind of ideology, and their general attitude was that my enemy today might be my employer tomorrow, so I had better watch out to protect myself from being killed” (Hoppe 2021, 155). This way of fighting wars was completely alien to how nations wage them today.

THE ITALIAN WARS AND THE DOWNFALL OF THE *CONDOTTIERI*

The dominance of the institution of the *condottieri* ended with the Italian Wars (Donvito 2014, 48). The Italian wars were a six-decade long conflict that took place in history. It involved many of the powers of Western Europe and lasted from 1494 to 1559 (Shaw 2019, 1). The Italians ultimately were unable to completely repel the invaders and suffered many defeats. These defeats were what led Machiavelli to blame the mercenaries for the Italian’s poor performance (Machiavelli 2005, 43). This legacy caused (either by reputational damage or other factors) the *condottieri* to lose their position at the center of Italian military conflicts and their unique role as the primary military force of many Italian city states. They ceased to be relied upon as one of the chief military forces of Italy.

The Italian Wars started with the invasion of Charles VIII of France. He invaded to enforce his inheritance to the kingdom of Naples which his family received from pope Clement the IV in 1265. He also sought to secure France’s claim to the duchy of Milan (Shaw 2019, 7-8). He began his expedition into Italy in 1494, invading through the Alps (ibid, 17-19). This led to a chain reaction that pulled many other powers into Italy including Spain and the Holy Roman empire. Many of these powers had claims over different portions of Italy. In response to these invasions, Italian City states tried to defend themselves by forming leagues among themselves to repel the invaders. Eventually the Spanish Habsburgs were able to come out “on top” winning both Milan and Naples the focal point of the wars.

One of the major developments in war that came about during the Italian Wars was the greater importance that artillery took on. The use of field fortifications made battlefield use of artillery necessary to destroy such obstacles (Mallet 1974, 160-161). This new age of artillery led military power to be further condensed in the hands of the “states.” It just wasn’t feasible for mercenary companies to own large artillery trains. Historian Michael Mallet explains “the major artillery trains were owned by the states; the manufacture or purchase of the guns and of the materials needed to use them, and the administrative and organizational problems of moving them, were enterprises that only states could afford on any large scale” (ibid). The *condottieri* were unable to keep up with these new technological and military innovations, decreasing their relevance overall.

Another major obstacle the *condottieri* faced during the Italian Wars was their relatively small size. The war was far larger than those smaller forces of mercenaries could deal with. As, “foreign powers getting involved, war became too large-scale for the *condottiere* to handle, and for their services to be a reasonable answer to. Even when most of the Northern Italian states, including Ludovico Sforza and Milan, banded together to oppose the French, the pressure was too great. In 1509, after the French army crushed the (relatively) small force of condottiere the Battle of Agnadello” (Hukil 2025, 79). No matter how skilled the mercenaries were, numerical inferiority was too great an obstacle to overcome. Modern armies fielded by governments were able to simply outnumber the professional businessmen of the *condottieri*. This account seems to suggest that a lack of numerical power was a part of the condottieri’s downfall.

Another factor marked the end of the *condottieri*’s preeminent place in renaissance Italy was the adjustments that the Italian Wars forced the city “states” to make. They had to resort to not only use conventional troops but also conscript civilians to fight for their cause; “In response

to this overwhelming threat to the survival of their realms, the ruling elites began to commit the one act which would forever end the condottiere phenomenon: they started conscripting civilians, including up to one man from each household in certain regions” (Hukil 2025, 79). The defeats that the Italians suffered during the Italian Wars forced the Italian cities to adopt one of the central elements of a more totalizing military power. The power of the more conventional foes they faced forced them to adopt some of this power for themselves. This represents the victory (at least on the field of battle) of a non-mercenary army with civilian troops and mercenaries (if they are to be used at all) as mere auxiliaries. The Italians adapted to these new conditions by updating their mobilization tactics.

This massive war overturned the established order in Italy and as previously explained changed how the Italians conducted war. Those new obstacles of artillery, size of armies, and competition with conscription caused the city states to look elsewhere for the production of violence. Due to these conditions, they determined that the costs of keeping the *condottieri* as their primary armed forces were greater than the benefits of doing so. They decided to take their demand for violence elsewhere, often coming to the conclusion that they needed to produce it more directly. This brings one to questions about how governments engage with violence more generally.

POWER AND THE TENDENCY TOWARDS TOTAL WAR

Now this paper will examine the relationship between the production of violence by governments for purposes of war and the powers those governments possess. Governments use violence to protect their power and authority within whatever they define as their region or sphere of authority. They also use that violence in order to preserve their legitimacy as a government (and by extension the legitimacy they have to wield power) either by “cracking

down” on dissent or by protecting their citizens from harm. However, the power that violence bolsters can also determine the way that violence is used, or at least the incentives that shape how governments decide how said violence is used.

Mises writes about how the great power and “socialism” of modern nation states led to the rise of total war. He argues that earlier governments in Europe simply lacked the tools for large scale or total wars. They wanted to be violent and engage in large scale conquest, but they were unable to because of the constraints of their system of governance. In his words, “This philosophy of boundless conquest also animated the rulers of medieval Europe. They aimed first of all at the utmost expansion of the size of their realms. But the institutions of feudalism provided them with only scanty means for warfare” (Mises 1996, 821). This produced limited warfare in Europe with smaller armies that kept civilians out of war. However, this changes with the rise of the nation-state. This rise not only allows for greater warfare, but it also incentivizes greater violence as the government plays a greater role in the lives of citizens. As he explains, “While laissez faire eliminates the causes While laissez faire eliminates the causes of international conflict, government interference with business and socialism creates conflicts for which no peaceful solution can be found. While under free trade and freedom of migration no individual is concerned about the territorial size of his country, under the protective measures of economic nationalism nearly every citizen has a substantial interest in these territorial issues. The enlargement of the territory subject to the sovereignty of his own government means material improvement for him or at least relief from restrictions which a foreign government has imposed upon his well-being” (Ibid, 823-824). “Socialism” ties the citizens together under the power of the government. It causes everyone to try to either externalize the costs of such a policy or temporarily relieve them through conquest.

In the above quotation Mises is talking about more modern problems of government intervention, but this can also apply to a lesser extent to other growths in the power of the government. Each new burden imposed by a government on its people means that it will have to fall to someone and most would prefer it to happen to conquered foreigners rather than themselves. Additionally, the threat of having new burdensome consequences applied to the people of the losing government incentivizes the people of the defending side to support or at least acquiesce to infringements on their liberty or property rights. The power to conscript was mentioned above, and it seems reasonable to assume that the governments of the Italian City States would not have been able to institute conscription if those city states were not in a state of unprecedented risk from the perspective of the civilians and peasants. That conscription also opens the doors for further strengthening of governmental power. Robert Higgs pointed out that conscription can help pave the way for lesser “abuses.” If something that takes so much ownership over a person, to the point of ordering them to die for the state, is allowed then it makes sense that lesser intrusions into what people had previously considered their liberty could be allowed as well. Speaking regarding the era of the Second World War Higgs states, “Virtually everyone who considered the matter, from influential economists, bureaucrats, and congressmen right up to Supreme Court justices and the President himself, used and accepted the validity of the moral argument: if A is all right, then X is certainly all right; where A was military conscription and X was any governmental suppression of individual rights whatsoever, especially any denial of private property rights” (Higgs 1987, 235). Thus, an increase in power undertaken to bolster military power can also strengthen other aspects of governmental power down the road. And this strengthening of power also allows the government to wield greater violence to protect the power it has obtained.

As alluded to above, greater power and authority can also strengthen the government's ability to use violence. As a government's "arsenal" of political tools grows and the greater the legitimacy it has to use those tools the more it can extract from its people to wage war on other governments. The powers of conscription and taxation allow a government to throw nearly the full force of their people at the enemy in times of war. The more legitimacy a state has the larger the percentage of their citizenry's resources can they siphon off for their war machine. The more power a government has the greater ability it has to fight a total war.

The ability to harness an entire nation, country, or state for violence is a completely overwhelming one. How could a government compete whose revenue is merely from a few vessel lords or the personal estates of rulers? Thus, if a government attacks an adversary whose ability to extract resources, wealth or soldiers from its territory is weaker than it will have a crushing advantage. Such a "lopsided" matchup could be compared to a private citizen trying to wage war with a government. One could call it unfair. Thus, the defender is incentivized to try to even the playing field by using higher taxation, and other methods of mobilization to extract as much resources and from their own territory as possible. Political philosopher Bertrand De Jouvenel makes a similar point regarding conscription in the Second World War, "That the entire populations of Great Britain and the United States, countries where there was no military conscription and the rights of the individual were held sacred, should have become merely so much "human potential," distributed and applied by Power as might best maximize the war effort, 2 is easily explained. Germany was employing in her design of world conquest all her national resources, and there was no restraining her by other countries with only a part of theirs" (De Jouvenel 1962, 2). As in World War 2 this creates an "arms race" where both sides compete in a game of who can seize hold of their territory and everything in it the most. Neither side can

back down and the consequences this has last long beyond the war. Both parties remain further empowered even during peace time. Perhaps the power might have decreased a little as Higgs explained above, but it will still be higher than it previously was. This ‘ratchet effect’ matches the case of conscription in the Italian Wars quite well. When faced with those who had more modern governmental structures, the Italian city states were forced to adapt it seems by further expanding their control over their own territories. This may not explain everything, but it is certainly a large part of the “picture”

This trend of wars becoming wars of the people as well as a war of their leaders is spoken to by Hoppe. He talks about how this development led to wars being more ideological. “During this period, from 1500 to 1648, for the first time the wars take on an ideological connotation. What I mentioned before was that mercenaries had no ideology to fight for. The various feudal nobles fighting each other typically also had no ideological purposes in mind behind their fighting, but their reasons for fighting were more or less inheritance disputes, which tend to be settled by occupation; once you have occupied a certain territory, then the war’s basically over” (Hoppe 2021, 157). This period which includes the “tail end” of the Italian Wars, was one where the people started getting involved in wars. This is in contrast to previous wars, which as alluded to above, were more private affairs. While the goal of this paper is not to examine the ideologies of the people, this change represents the trends that were taking place in Europe during the time of this paper’s analysis. Because of the changes that also surrounded the Italian Wars, governments and the wars they fought were becoming more all-encompassing. These new wars “tend to be far more brutal than professional wars because they involve the participation of the masses” (Ibid). The Italian Wars were part of a movement towards both total wars and governments powerful enough that most would recognize them as states.

COMPARITIVE ADVANTAGE IN MOBILIZATION

This paper has been hinting at the reasons for the downfall of the *condottieri* for quite a while now. However, there is another “piece in the puzzle” that must be put in place. These Italian mercenaries had another huge disadvantage as compared to more conventional troops.

The *condottieri* had a comparative disadvantage in what one might call mobilization. Mobilization in this case being defined as the collection of the necessary number of arms and troops necessary to succeed in battle. This would be of little concern when the *condottieri* were fighting similarly small bands of mercenaries. They both had similar advantages and disadvantages. However, when up against the might of modern (for the time) armies this disadvantage caused them to suffer greatly.

As stated above, these disadvantages in mobilization manifested themselves in the Italian Wars in the form of a lack of troops and less artillery. They simply couldn't compete with the greater “manpower” and “firepower” of their adversaries. Despite their skill in combat and professionalism they simply lacked these essential elements and suffered greatly in battle for it. These deficits appear to have been too great to make up.

The comparative disadvantage of the *condottieri* in comparison to more conventional troops seem to be due to two factors. Firstly, it can be theorized that *condottieri* suffered from diseconomies of scale. One might imagine that maintaining a large force as a mercenary might come with some serious managerial difficulties. This is especially true if they were bound by a profit motive to some extent. Having so many troops might be a serious liability when not funding them through taxation and or conscription. Secondly, they didn't have as “deep pockets” as their governmental adversaries. The power to tax and conscript is overwhelming a mercenary company

could not hope to compete. The latter point is even more true the more advanced (in terms of power) the government's institutions are.

Therefore, the reason the *condottieri* failed is that they were the wrong choice in the face of the new era of warfare and governmental power that the Italian Wars represented. The burgeoning state power combined with the use of artillery made the comparative disadvantage that mercenaries have in mobilization much worse. The mercenaries were a poor choice of defense in this new era of large-scale conflict and conquest. It was less the fault of the mercenaries and more the fault of the Italian city states who did not recognize this new era and continued to hire the *condottieri*. This was a failure to choose the correct method of violence production on the part of the Italian governments.

One might object have several objections to the reasoning above. First they might wonder why the Italian City states could not loan the mercenary companies artillery pieces in order to even the odds. This bumps up against the principal-agent problem. While there was always a chance that mercenaries would turn on their buyers this prospect is far more problematic when they possess state-of-the-art artillery pieces which would be hard to counter. Additionally, it would seem unlikely that a city state which lent out those artillery pieces would have many more to spare, meaning that they would be trusting most of them with only a few, potentially treacherous mercenary bands. Another objection would be to question why mercenary companies could not group up to form an equivalent force to the invading armies. As to this it seems simply unlikely that these different companies would have the same cohesion as a unified fighting force trained to operate as one.

THE GOVERNMENT AS A NON-MARKET ENTREPRENEUR

This analysis allows one to conceive of the leaders of states as nonmarket entrepreneurs in the market for violence and warfare. Governments must navigate the uncertainty of geopolitical landscapes as opposed to supply and demand. This is not a matter of merely the technology used in war or the amount of money spent upon it. A leader of a government must decide whether to outsource violence to other entities or to directly produce it. The government must also decide what form exactly this violence will take and what institutions will be used to formalize it. In other words, it is making a production decision. To be successful in the production of violence they must accurately assess what the current situation “demands” and make predictions about the future. It is not so simple a process as deciding how much money to spend on violence or the military, they need to use their skills to direct “production.”

Of course, the comparison to entrepreneurs can only be taken so far. While incorrect predictions of uncertainty will “weed” out market entrepreneurs, entrepreneurs of violence are not subject to the same direct forces. They are not bound by supply and demand in the same way a market entrepreneur is. However, there is precious applied by other governments. This leads to a form of “non-market” competition between powers as they to determine the most efficient (for their ends) method of producing violence. This is illustrated in the earlier example of how the Italians were forced to start conscripting citizens to keep up with the invading armies. Competition through violence is vastly different from market competition but both can be quite effective at eliminating inefficient “entrepreneurs.”

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that the fall of the Italian mercenaries was due to the changing methods of warfare and the Italian City States not adopting. The Italian City States were forced to adjust their production of violence to avoid being completely outcompeted. It is

likely such patterns exist throughout history, but since that is beyond the scope of this paper, such studies will be reserved for further study (another area for future study would be a survey of primary sources during the Italian Wars that support this paper's thesis). Such a dynamic positions governments in our analysis as a quasi-entrepreneurial entity that must determine how to produce violence. They are always in conflict with each other trying to outmaneuver their competitors as they try to make the choices that will lead to the highest chances of victory. If they chooses wrong, they will face significant costs as the Italian Wars demonstrate.

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