

## **The Making of Warriors: The Militarization of the Rio de la Plata, 1806-1807<sup>12</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

Over the last two decades, war studies have focused mainly on the processes of change in how wars have been waged. The most important and fruitful debates have been anchored by the concept of ‘military revolution’, which has been replaced recently by the concepts of military mutation or transformation. Consequently, case studies have mostly shown us either radical or progressive changes within a given form of war, or the passage from one type of war to another. This paper will explore a different kind of change: one which takes place not in the way in which a particular society makes war, but in the advent of war itself as a social experience to a society that no longer had first-hand knowledge of war.

Lawrence Keeley rightly argues that, except for a handful of ethnographic oddities, societies without any knowledge of war in fact have never existed.<sup>3</sup> However, it is

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<sup>1</sup> To quote this article: Alejandro M. Rabinovich, “The Making of Warriors: The Militarization of the Rio de la Plata, 1806-1807”, in Richard Bessel, Nicholas Guyatt and Jane Rendall (eds.), *War, Empire and Slavery, 1770-1830*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp.81-98, reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>2</sup> This extract is taken from the author's original manuscript and has not been edited. The definitive version of this piece may be found in *War, Empire and Slavery, 1770-1830* edited by Richard Bessel, Nicholas Guyatt and Jane Rendall which can be accessed from [www.palgrave.com](http://www.palgrave.com)

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence H. Keeley, reviewing several of the most important multicultural studies available, concludes that less than 10 per cent of known human societies can be said ‘never or very rarely’ to have waged war. Moreover, most of these peaceful social groups can be placed in one of two categories: societies living in a situation of extreme geographical isolation (the Tikopians from

certainly possible to find historical configurations in which a given society, for whatever reasons, actually *experiences* the arrival of war as an absolute novelty that interrupts a peaceful state thought to be natural and permanent. That was exactly the case of the local population of the Rio de la Plata when it faced successive British invasions in 1806 and 1807.<sup>4</sup> As we will see, the Spanish colonial military system quickly surrendered, leaving the task of repelling the invaders in the hands of the local population which from that point onwards was militarized in a durable and revolutionary fashion.

On examining the abundant contemporary reflections on that particular military experience, we see that the sources unanimously speak of it as a social transformation which put an end to a secular, peaceful state. Spanish-American Dámaso de Uriburu, for instance, described the population of Rio de la Plata as ‘a defenceless people surprised by a martial display quite unknown to them, for they had lived in a state of uninterrupted peace for countless years’.<sup>5</sup> Tulio Halperín Donghi, one of the most important Argentine historians, has raised the question of whether local witnesses were not exaggerating the contrast between their new warlike reality and their peaceful past.<sup>6</sup> For the purpose of this

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Polynesia, the Cayapa from Ecuador); or ethnic minorities living under the administration of a modern State (the Gondi in India, the Lapps in Scandinavia). The obvious consequence of this data is that war is a constitutive element of human societies. See his *War before Civilization: the Myth of the Peaceful Savage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 25-28. This thesis aroused a lively and fundamental debate; see Douglas P Fry, *Beyond War. The Human Potential for Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> These two operations had sensational repercussions on the contemporary British public but, lost in the Napoleonic maelstrom, they aroused little interest from scholarly historians until recently. For a general account of the events, see Ian Fletcher, *The Waters of Oblivion: the British Invasion of the Rio de la Plata, 1806-07* (Tunbridge Wells: Spellmont, 1991). For a wider analysis of British policy in the area, see Klaus Gallo, *Great Britain and Argentina: From Invasion to Recognition, 1806-26* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001). In Argentine historiography the British invasion understandably occupies a much more central place; for facts and figures, we follow the classic investigations of Carlos Roberts, *Las Invasiones Inglesas del Rio de la Plata (1806-1807)* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2000), and Juan Beverina, *Las Invasiones Inglesas al Río de la Plata 1806-1807* (Buenos Aires: Círculo Militar, 1939).

<sup>5</sup> Dámaso de Uriburu, *Memorias 1794-1857* (Buenos Aires: UBA, 1934), p. 15. The British Major Alexander Gillespie stated: ‘They had slept for centuries in peace, and knew not the meaning of an enemy, saving from the tradition of former times, which informed them that their frontiers had once been exposed to the inroads of savage neighbors. . .’. See Alexander Gillespie, *Gleanings and Remarks: Collected during many months of residence at Buenos Ayres and within the Upper Country* (Leeds: B. Dewhurst, 1818), p. 190.

<sup>6</sup> Tulio Halperín Donghi stated: ‘This rise of the military is even more impressive when one considers the general dislike of the army as a career which, as almost all retrospective reports inform us, was dominant among the younger generation of the elite in Buenos Aires before 1806. “The sons of

chapter, however, the relevant question is not whether contemporary interpretations are historically accurate (that is, whether the local population was or was not telling the 'truth' when it presented its own experience). The important question concerns the historical conditions that made this experience possible in these particular terms, and the drastic consequences that this experience had over the following decades.

More generally, the cases in which peaceful societies confront war are particularly important because they experience the outbreak of a war as a radical and massive social transformation. The sources produced in such contexts present war as something to be discovered anew, and bring to light all the social mechanisms that are put to work in order to militarize a society and make war, as if they were actually invented or established from scratch. Thus by studying the particular case of the Rio de la Plata we will be able to address, as in a small but brightly illuminated laboratory, some of the main aspects of the Napoleonic Wars.

### **A Peaceful Colonial Society?**

In 1806, the life in the Spanish colonies of South America offered without doubt the most stark contrast to a Europe burning in the heat of war. Only faint echoes of battle reached the ears of a population which continued with their daily labours, interested, but mostly unconcerned, by the epic events taking place far away. Some calls of alarm were raised, but no significant defensive preparations were made, no mobilization of the population attempted. An anonymous manuscript, written in 1807 by a local witness, gives insight into the military state of the Rio de la Plata before the British Invasions:

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Buenos Aires have never been attracted by the military career; they preferred rather to be lawyers" – thus Mariquita Sánchez in her recollections of colonial times, and almost all witnesses, seem to agree with this remarkable lady. But are not these witnesses, impressed with the deep changes begun precisely in 1806, unwittingly exaggerating the contrast with earlier attitudes?' Tulio Halperín Donghi, 'Revolutionary Militarization in Buenos Aires 1806-1815', *Past and Present* 40 (1968): 84-107.

Of all the Spanish territories, South America was probably the only one that was not suffering the effects of the long and terrible war [the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars]. Its inhabitants enjoyed a tranquillity that matched very well their character and the local climate. While the horrific sound of weapons had Europe in awe, it only struck their spirits as a curious novelty. And as the metropolis struggled to sustain the war effort, her colonies took pleasure in their state of peace. Accordingly, the fortification of cities or the preparation of a military force was the very last of their concerns. Everything exuded calm and peace. The unsuspecting local authorities focused on the internal security and happiness of their people, greatly fomenting commerce and the arts.<sup>7</sup>

This picture of a peaceful Rio de la Plata seems inconsistent with two very well known elements of the local configuration: hostile Indian peoples along the southern and central frontiers, and Portuguese pressure on the territories of the eastern bank of the Rio de la Plata. Indeed, this combination should have produced a militarized society deeply concerned with defence and security issues.<sup>8</sup> By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, the actual nature of the local society was quite the opposite. A brief look at the historical background should provide both an explanation of this apparent discrepancy and a deeper look into the social limits of military experience.

In the late 1790s, the city of Buenos Aires, situated on the banks of the Rio de la Plata, was already an up-and-coming capital of an enormous viceroyalty. With more than 40,000 inhabitants and a flourishing economy, what had been a small village in the preceding century was now a city comparable to 'cities of the second rank' in peninsular

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<sup>7</sup> We found this anonymous manuscript from 1807 under the title *Reconquista de Buenos Ayres y Sitio de Montevideo. Memoria histórica por un Imparcial*, Museo Mitre, Buenos Aires, Archivo Colonial, ARM.E., C.2, P.I, N°18.

<sup>8</sup> For an interesting thesis on how ethnic frontiers favour the development of martial cultures, see Peter Turchin, *War and Peace and War. The Life Cycles of Imperial Nations* (New York: Pi Press, 2006), pp. 31-55.

Spain.<sup>9</sup> Its peripheral position had spared it any major role in the schemes of European powers. However, the city had long struggled against its Portuguese neighbours, who challenged its regional supremacy with a commercial outpost of their own: the city of Colonia do Sacramento, on the opposite side of the river.

This chronic conflict nevertheless failed to mobilize the local population consistently. Fearing the emergence of a potentially dangerous Spanish-American military elite, the Spanish crown did not employ the locals on a massive scale, relying instead on expensive peninsular armies shipped from Europe for the occasion.<sup>10</sup> These forces would cross the ocean, fight a number of battles and then return to their European bases upon the signing of a peace treaty. This *ancien regime* style of warfare served Spanish interests but relegated the colonial subjects to the role of spectators or mere auxiliaries. In 1777, when the decisive battle for supremacy in the Rio de la Plata was fought, the people of Buenos Aires played but a minor role. They passively looked on as a European Spanish army of 10,000 men arrived, triumphed, and imposed the signing of a long-lasting peace.

An analogous situation characterized the frontier with the Indians. The nomadic warrior societies of the Pampa had haunted the minds of the rural population ever since the foundation of the city. But as the border was pushed south and was progressively fortified, the conflict stabilized and the imminent danger to the city vanished. The whole

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<sup>9</sup> This comparison is made by Halperín Donghi in *Revolución y Guerra. Formación de una élite dirigente en la Argentina criolla* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1994), p. 41. Under the restrictive Spanish commercial regulations, Buenos Aires enjoyed the profitable position of sole, and obligatory, intermediary between the interior provinces and the metropolis. The many imported articles were paid for by the growing exports of hides and the steady flow of Upper Peruvian silver. Moreover, after the creation of the viceroyalty in 1776-7, the city became a very important bureaucratic centre, which in turn promoted the emergence of a wide range of complementary activities – of craftsmen, carriers, laundresses and so on. See Susan M. Socolow, *The Bureaucrats of Buenos Aires 1769-1810: Amor al Real Servicio* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1987); Lyman Johnson, *The Artisans of Buenos Aires during the Viceroyalty, 1776-1810* (Ph.D. diss., The University of Connecticut, 1974), and Lyman Johnson, 'Estimaciones de la población de Buenos Aires en 1744, 1778 y 1810', *Desarrollo económico*, 19.73 (1979): 107-119.

<sup>10</sup> For the general lines of military colonial organization we are following Juan Beverina, *El Virreynato de las Provincias del Río de la Plata. Su Organización Militar* (Buenos Aires: Círculo Militar, 1992). For a study on the campaigns against the Portuguese: pp. 133-193.

of the eighteenth century came to be known locally as the ‘age of treaties’ due to the success with which the colonial authorities had been able to arrange a durable alliance with the Indians.<sup>11</sup> The southern tribes acknowledged the sovereignty of the Spanish king, accepted a fixed frontier line, and partially demobilized their warriors.

Thus two distinct but complementary elements marked the Spanish defence system in the late eighteenth century. In the first place, it had consistently managed to eliminate the most immediate threats by a complex policy of negotiation, diplomacy, and commerce. By 1806, almost thirty years had passed since the last noteworthy military action in the region had taken place, and an entire generation had been raised without any first-hand experience of warfare.<sup>12</sup> Second, even when conflict did arise, the defence system relegated the local population to a subordinate military position in which local elites rarely commanded the troops, did not determine the objectives of the war, and were not supposed to wage any decisive military campaigns.<sup>13</sup>

These two elements combined to generate a local population notoriously renowned for its resistance to performing any kind of military service. The absence of immediate threats and the presence of a military institution which was not seen as an expression of

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<sup>11</sup> From 1741 on, the establishment of a border was negotiated with the southern indigenous peoples, and in 1790 a definitive peace treaty was signed. The Indians renounced violence, and in exchange their lands were respected and an important policy of ‘gifts’ and incentives was established. This peace lasted until the 1820s. Susana Bandieri, *Cruzando la cordillera. La frontera argentino-chilena como espacio social* (Neuquén: CEHIR, 2001); Raúl Mandrini, *Vivir entre dos mundos. Conflicto y convivencia en las fronteras del sur de la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Taurus, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> An overwhelming majority of the existing militia service records state that Río de la Plata militiamen had no military experience whatsoever, the only exceptions being peninsular officers over fifty years old. See the comprehensive database *El Ejército de América antes de la Independencia. Hojas de Servicio y Estudio Histórico*, Juan Marchena Fernández (dir.), CD-ROM (Madrid: MAPFRE, 2005). It would seem that a state of peace of thirty years was more than enough to erase the type of military experience that this society had. What we have is neither a society without war nor a population without any kind of military organization, but a region that had been pacified a generation previously. For an approach to the consequences of generational experiences in attitudes towards war, see Turchin, *War and Peace*, pp. 233-4.

<sup>13</sup> Juan Marchena Fernández advances the thesis that the organization of militia systems succeeded only where local American elites directed the process, and faced terrible opposition when peninsular elites monopolized the officer positions. The Río de la Plata case strongly backs up this thesis. Of all Spanish-American regions, it is the only one where the percentage of peninsular officers (and even of noncommissioned officers) substantially exceeds that of Americans over the entire 1760-1800 period. See Marchena, *El Ejército de América*, pp. 213-217.

the local society, created a set of social attitudes quite the opposite of any ‘military spirit’. Each time the royal authorities tried to incorporate the locals into the defensive system, their initiatives failed miserably. Desertion and disobedience levels were so high that local recruitment for the regular regiments eventually was abandoned, and even militia units could not be relied upon.<sup>14</sup> Military officers and witnesses regarded this issue as a problem of the nature of the local population.<sup>15</sup> Future Viceroy Vértiz, for instance, stated that, ‘the sons of this country have a natural aversion to military service, and more so when they find ways to survive with more profit while they see that the troops are naked. Experience taught us that most of the recruits do not stay for long, because they have a natural propensity to desertion, stealing uniforms and weapons. In the end, no punitive or precautionary measures could limit the excessive and scandalous desertion, which forced me to stop the recruitment altogether’.<sup>16</sup>

This general ‘aversion to military service’ was not necessarily an aversion to warfare itself (war, strictly speaking, was already absent), but a reaction against a particular type of call to arms which was regarded simply as a disciplinary burden imposed by the colonial authorities. This was a social situation in which war and military concerns, although they were present, could not exceed a certain threshold. Below that line, military culture and values could not permeate the rest of society, and remained the privilege of a restricted, peripheral, and sometimes hated, professional elite. If our analysis of the historical context is correct, social attitudes towards the military – the ‘peaceful nature’ of the locals – in late colonial Rio de la Plata, could be reversed by an important change in the two elements which sustained these attitudes in the first place. The first British invasion, by presenting an immediate threat, and by producing a

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<sup>14</sup> In a letter from 30 April 1781, Viceroy Vértiz said: ‘The militia units cannot offer any significant support in the case of an invasion. . . . Most of this people hate any kind of service, subordination or civilized life, for they are nomads and naturally vagrants. They even refuse to take arms when called upon to defend their families and properties. On the fields, the desertion rate knows no bounds.’ In Beverina, *El Virreinato*, p. 280.

<sup>15</sup> This was indeed an important notion in the period we are examining. Consider the historical thesis of natural scientist Alexander von Humboldt on the peaceful state of Spanish America, *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, 1814), vol. 4, p. 216.

<sup>16</sup> José de Vértiz, ‘Memoria, 1784’, *Revista del Archivo General de Buenos Aires* 3 (1871): 432.

completely different type of mobilization, offers the opportunity to reflect on how, for the first time, the military threshold was dramatically and unexpectedly crossed. To understand these consequences of the aggression, however, the nature of the invading force has first to be established.

### **The Spark**

The British expeditionary force that invaded Buenos Aires under the command of Admiral Sir Home Popham and Colonel William Carr Beresford would ignite a fire destined to spread over a continent and last many decades. What was the master plan that brought these men to the distant shores of South America? By whose authority had this intercontinental operation of enormous consequence been launched? What interests, what motives, and what rational calculations did the invaders serve? By answering these questions, we will have a brief opportunity to examine the dynamic forces of war more closely: how the war spread, how it crossed oceans, and what patterns characterized its propagation.

In fact, in the British Cabinet, plans to take over the Spanish colonies were numerous. For several years, merchants, diplomats, and naval officers had presented their proposals for invading Buenos Aires based on the calamitous state of its defences and the economic potential of the South American market. In 1804, at William Pitt's request, Popham and Venezuelan patriot Miranda presented yet another ambitious plan to seize control of all the Spanish-American colonies: this proposed that three coordinated task forces attack from the Caribbean Sea, the Pacific and the Atlantic, thus robbing Napoleon's allies of their resources.<sup>17</sup> The proposal was well received, but the increasing intensity of the European theatre of war forced its postponement and Popham was

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<sup>17</sup> All these projects are presented in Roberts, *Las Invasiones*, pp. 59-104.

assigned instead to a force that would try to take the Cape of Good Hope from the Dutch.<sup>18</sup>

The South African colony surrendered after a short struggle and, having fulfilled their mission, the idle troops awaited fresh orders. Up to this point, military events followed the normal path ascribed to imperial politics. Assessing costs and benefits, the British government had officially named and sent a regular expedition to take over a rival's stronghold on African shores. From this point onwards, however, we shall see that war could follow a very different path. In fact, Popham and the other chief commanders garrisoned at the Cape had no further official instructions, and fresh orders from London took time to arrive.<sup>19</sup>

The British commanders relied on limited and inaccurate information about the development of the overall strategic situation. They did not know, for instance, that Pitt had died and that major changes were to follow in the conduct of war. Most of the reports they received were mere rumours spread by that gigantic and informal spy ring formed by the merchant community.<sup>20</sup> The reports coming in from Buenos Aires told of the arrival of an immense treasure-trove of silver from the Peruvian mines, now awaiting shipment to Spain where it would serve mainly to pay the price of the French alliance.

Considering that British military laws at that time were extremely liberal with regard to partaking in the spoils of war and that the troops were succumbing to the

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<sup>18</sup> For the local consequences of this operation, see Nigel Worden, 'Armed with Ostrich Feathers: Order and Disorder in the Cape Slave Uprising of 1808', in this volume.

<sup>19</sup> In fact the original instructions stipulated that part of the troops were to proceed shortly to India, while Popham was to sail to Saint Helena and await orders ('Instructions to Sir Home Popham, 29 July 1805'). However, a subsequent order commanded him to remain at the Cape with all the troops and await further instructions ('Copy of a letter to Sir Home Popham, 14 September 1805'), *A full and correct report of the trial of Sir Home Popham* (London: Printed for J. and J. Richardson, C. Chapple, 1807), pp. 7-8, 13, 82.

<sup>20</sup> Popham received an order to send a frigate on a reconnaissance mission to the east coast of South America. However, the intention of the Admiralty was only to gather intelligence from a defensive perspective - that is, to verify that no threat to the Cape was being prepared by the Spanish. See 'Copy of a letter to Sir Home Popham, 2 August 1805', *A full and correct account*, p. 13.

boredom of garrison life, it should not be surprising that Popham had little difficulty in convincing a number of officers about the desirability of storming Buenos Aires, even without orders. After brief negotiation with other commanders, the operation was agreed.<sup>21</sup> They sailed with most of the fleet and a very good battalion of Highlanders;<sup>22</sup> in all, only 1,600 men set sail to invade a city of 40,000 inhabitants in a whole enemy subcontinent.

It may seem amazing today that a small group of officers were able to launch an intercontinental operation without official sanction or support of any kind. When we consider that these men would willingly embark on a seemingly suicidal mission, risking death and court martial for no apparent purpose other than that of action, booty and glory, we come to realize that war actually had an explosive potential that extended far beyond any strategic or political control. The necessities of war had made warriors of these men; they had been assembled, trained and armed in order to gather maximum strength.<sup>23</sup> But now, after months of tedious drill, waiting and sailing, the primary objective of their mission had been achieved without fully testing their fighting capability. They needed to act. They needed to fight - not as a continuation of politics but for the sake of fighting itself. In his justification of the decision to invade Buenos Aires, Popham stated: 'I hope the view I have given their Lordships of my conduct, and the motives by which I was induced so strongly to press on Sir David Baird the expediency of undertaking a project of zeal, enterprise, and exertion, promising so much honour and prospects of advantage to the Empire, will be considered by their Lordships as far preferable to the alternative of allowing the squadron I have the honour to command to moulder away its native energy,

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<sup>21</sup> 'Copy of a letter from Sir Home Popham, 13 April 1806', *A full and correct account*, pp. 35-8.

<sup>22</sup> The main infantry corps was the fine 1st Battalion of the 71st Regiment of Highland Light Infantry, which boasted an impressive record that included the Siege of Acre during Napoleon's invasion of Egypt and Syria. A rare firsthand account of the internal life of this corps, including the invasion of Buenos Aires and the subsequent Peninsular War, may be found in *Journal of a soldier of the 71st, or Glasgow Regiment, Highland Light Infantry, from 1806 to 1815* (Edinburgh: Balfour and Clarke, 1819).

<sup>23</sup> For a general view of the British troops, J.A. Houlding, *Fit for Service: The Training of the British Army, 1715-1795* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981). For Scottish soldiers, Andrew Mackillop, *More Fruitful than the Soil. Army, Empire and the Scottish Highlands, 1715-1815* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000).

by wintering in False Bay, and eventually become paralysed, after remaining so long as it has done in a state of cold defensive inactivity'.<sup>24</sup> Without warning, without orders and without a plan, this adventurous expedition landed thus on the shores of the Rio de la Plata.

## The Fire

All the daily records demonstrate that in the open and completely undefended city of Buenos Aires, war was the last of the citizen's concerns during the first months of 1806. Autobiographies address nothing but business, commerce and agriculture. The week before the events that would change this state of affairs, the minutes of the city council reveal that the main concern of the local elite was the choice of a new carpet for the floor of the city hall.<sup>25</sup> Then, all of a sudden, on 25 June, the same records note that eleven sails had been spotted and that the alarm had been sounded. A silence of nearly one month follows. However, whereas the official accounts say nothing, that day saw an explosion of personal accounts, and even almost illiterate people chose to open their private diaries at the moment of the alert.<sup>26</sup> Thus through the eyes of witnesses from every social background we can see in great detail the events that followed<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> *A full and correct account*, p. 38.

<sup>25</sup> 21 June 1806, *Acuerdos del extinguido Cabildo de Buenos Aires. 1805 a 1807* (Buenos Aires: Ed. Kraft, 1926), vol. 2, f. 171.

<sup>26</sup> One of these documents, written by an anonymous militiaman, is indeed extraordinary. With the most peculiar spelling, it gives us a day to day account of the major events: *Diario de un Soldado 1806-1810*, (Buenos Aires: Ministerio del Interior, 1960). We follow it closely for the interpretation of local accounts.

<sup>27</sup> The participation in the fighting against the British became a mandatory chapter in any personal memoir of that generation. A good sample of these texts are available in *Biblioteca de Mayo, Colección de Obras y Documentos para la Historia Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Senado de la Nación, 1960), vol.2. Dozens of militiamen were called upon by the Cabildo to report the deeds of their units. These declarations are collected in Juan Coronado, *Documentos inéditos para servir a la historia del Río de la Plata durante las invasiones de los generales ingleses Beresford y Whitelocke en los años de 1806 y 1807* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta Republicana, 1870).

As soon as the alert was sounded, hundreds of men - military and civilians alike - ran in disorder to the arsenals, seeking arms and orders. As we have seen, they lacked organization and training. Militia units were cobbled together as volunteers arrived and were sent to face the British column already marching towards the city. What ensued was not really a battle. When Spanish troops arrived within sight of the invaders, they either opened fire while completely out of range, or they realized that they had been given bullets that did not match their guns. They disbanded with little loss of life upon hearing the roar of the first British volley and the sound of bagpipes. A few hours later the city surrendered, military and civilian authorities swore allegiance to the British Crown, and rich treasure was shipped to Britain.

The capture of Buenos Aires may not have produced great feats of arms, but the British public rightfully celebrated it as a gallant victory, and *The Times* went so far as to call it 'one of the most important events of the present war'.<sup>28</sup> In the meantime, for the Spanish-Americans the novelty of military defeat would be less pleasant but have long-lasting consequences. Many personal accounts are available which reveal the impressions created by the triumphant entrance of the tiny column of red-coated soldiers into the city streets. They speak of an absolute shock, a collective trauma of immense proportions that would become a painful memory in personal life stories.

Some witnesses even testify that men openly cried on the streets.<sup>29</sup> They all speak of a mixture of anger, impotence and shame, with some of these men and women falling into a state of depression. The meaning of this collective disarray is very clear. At the sight of these professional soldiers marching proudly, the people of Buenos Aires could not but become painfully aware of the contrast with themselves. At their very first call to arms, they had been swept off the battlefield by a mere handful of warriors. The actual

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<sup>28</sup> 'Capture of Buenos Ayres', *The Times*, 13 Sept. 1806, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> M. Moreno, 'Vida y Memorias de Mariano Moreno', in *Biblioteca de Mayo*, p. 1187.

experience of their military incompetence suddenly made their peaceful past seem a period of decadence never to be repeated.<sup>30</sup>

The desire for revenge soon became universal, and the number of rebellious acts rapidly rose to an alarming extent. British sentries were attacked, officers were kidnapped, and insults and challenges followed the conquerors wherever they went. At first this was just a series of individual initiatives, but groups of partisans began to form and soon the British authority was challenged. Forty-five days after the city's capture, regular Spanish reinforcements arrived from Montevideo and, with the addition of the locals, they attacked and eventually overwhelmed the British garrison in a battle fought in the central square of Buenos Aires. The invaders surrendered and were taken prisoner, and the people of the Rio de la Plata celebrated their first military victory.

Many changes followed immediately. In order to prevent an imminent second invasion, for the first time the locals stripped the Viceroy of its military powers and elected a martial leader who was to plunge them into total militarization. British Major Alexander Gillespie, one of the most lucid witnesses of these events, observes: 'From this day we may date their military origin, and character, from that day they began to know their own importance and powers as a people, and although they have little cause to exult in the triumph over but one effective regiment, still the issue infused a general confidence in themselves, a new spirit of chivalry amongst all . . . A few days only had elapsed from the surrender of the place, when a military enthusiasm broke forth in every rank of society. All the youths of the most respectable families hastened to enrol their names, and

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<sup>30</sup> A perfect example of these feelings is offered by militia captain Manuel Belgrano : 'I confess I was infuriated. I felt so ashamed of ignoring even the most basic military principles. My embarrassment grew even stronger when I saw the enemy troops enter the city, and realized the insignificance of their number compared with that of the population of Buenos Aires. This haunted my mind and almost drove me into madness. It was so painful to see my country in such a state of degradation that it could be dominated by this corsair-like enterprise, led by the brave and honest Beresford whose courage in this perilous operation I will always admire.' 'Autobiografía', in *Biblioteca de Mayo*, pp. 958-959.

to submit to the laws of discipline. Recruiting parties daily paraded through the streets, beating up for volunteers'.<sup>31</sup>

The very same men who a month and a half previously had scorned any form of military service now left their occupations to enlist willingly in militia units, paying for their own uniforms and risking their lives without any immediate compensation. Contemporary observers could not help but notice this remarkable change in social attitudes towards the military and began to speak of a 'transformation' in the character, or the spirit, of the people. In order to understand fully the scope of this transformation, it must be evaluated on several levels.

## **A City in Arms**

### The militarization

The militarization process which began with the reconquest of the city was neither centrally planned nor directed from above. It sprang from the people, arising spontaneously from the energies that the battle had unleashed.<sup>32</sup> Patterns become evident when the process is looked at closely as it unfolded day by day. What can be seen at the initial formation of every new militia unit is a small, informal gathering of a few men who shared pre-existing social attributes. At the risk of over-simplifying, two different types of gatherings can be singled out. The first type was that called into being by a person of a certain social and economic standing, though not necessarily a prominent member of the elite. He would start by calling his dependants, employees, and family to

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<sup>31</sup> Gillespie, *Gleanings and Remarks*, p. 100.

<sup>32</sup> On 5 September 1806, the government issued a proclamation inviting the people to form military units. This particular call to arms does not disprove the idea that these new mobilization patterns arose from below. On the contrary, the governor who issued this document was Jacques de Liniers, the military hero of the reconquest. The people in arms that vanquished the first British expedition had just made him military commander of the capital – in place of the Viceroy – so that he would promote these developments. C. Roberts, *Las Invasiones*, p. 230. Buenos Aires received militia reinforcements from the interior provinces, but the main local fighting force was formed by volunteers who enlisted willingly, above and beyond their legal obligations. Beverina, *El Virreinato*, p. 333.

arms. The new company thus would mimic the social structure, and carry the name of its founder, who personally would provide it with uniforms, horses, guns, and sustenance.<sup>33</sup>

The second type of gathering was horizontal, formed by peers with shared social status and background. Interestingly, the colonial regulations had envisaged the formation of militia units based on either occupational categories (thus the units of butchers, farmers, merchants), or ethnic categories (thus the corps of blacks, whites, Indians), but neither set of criteria predominated. Instead, men spontaneously organized themselves according to their geographical origins, forming companies of Catalans, Galicians, Asturians, clothing and arming themselves with funds from volunteer subscriptions.<sup>34</sup>

This kind of military mobilization implied a radical challenge to the traditional balance of social forces and quickly undermined imperial authority, encouraging revolutionary tendencies that eventually would put an end to the regime. In what was to be the very first democratic experience of the Spanish American colonies, these men voted to elect their officers. Only afterwards, when the unit was already operational and counted between fifty and two hundred men, was the company formally 'presented' to the governor, who could not but acquiesce to its formation and grant his protection and monetary support. Where the colonial recruitment failed, the new militarization from below proved extraordinarily effective.<sup>35</sup> In less than a month, more than seven thousand

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<sup>33</sup> Martín Rodríguez, 'Memoria', in *Biblioteca de Mayo*, pp. 1507-9, and Cornelio Zelaya, 'Memoria de los pocos servicios...', in *Biblioteca de Mayo*, pp. 1552-56, offer good examples. During the first days of British occupation, each would first talk to friends and relatives and form an informal group of five, ten, twenty partisans. A number of these groups would eventually coalesce into a single unit, put together by the prominent and wealthy local leader Martín de Pueyrredón. After the reconquest, this squadron and others would become the regular cavalry of the city, but they were still known as the 'Hussars of Pueyrredón'.

<sup>34</sup> *Relación de servicios del Tercio de Voluntarios de Galicia, 1807*, Museo Mitre, Buenos Aires, Archivo Colonial, ARM.E., C.3, P.I, N°31; *Relación de los meritos y servicios contraídos por el batallón de voluntarios urbanos cantabros de la amistad en Buenos Ayres* (Buenos Aires: Real Imprenta de los Niños expósitos, 1807).

<sup>35</sup> Cf.: 'While enlistments had remained at low levels and desertion rates had trended upward until 1806, the British invasions produced a dramatic alteration in local attitudes toward the military. Across the city's social landscape, military vocations were discovered by the thousands.' Lyman Johnson, 'The Military as Catalyst of Change in Late Colonial Buenos Aires', in *Revolution and Restoration. The Rearrangement of power in Argentina, 1776-1860*, ed. M. Szuchman and J. Brown (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

troops were raised. When the number of men enlisted in every company is compared with the population figures as a whole, it can be seen that almost the entire free, adult male population was effectively enrolled.<sup>36</sup>

This implied dramatic changes in almost every aspect of social life. An impressive 95 per cent of the yearly vice-regal budget was devoted to the war effort - half of it to the payment of these troops.<sup>37</sup> For several months, other activities of the State were virtually abandoned. Schools were transformed into barracks, courts ceased to dispense justice, regular prisons were emptied.<sup>38</sup> In order to feed the war effort, the city seized every public resource available and massive donations were collected in order to support the troops. But no society can survive without a delicate balance between dedication to the military on the one hand, and economic necessities on the other. How then was it possible for Buenos Aires to survive for a year with a militarization rate of well over 90 per cent?

To begin with, one third of the city's population were enslaved Africans,<sup>39</sup> and unlike in the independence period that was to follow, during the British invasions these slaves were not enlisted in large numbers.<sup>40</sup> When the moment of battle finally arrived, the slaves fought valiantly as irregulars, and freedom was granted to many of them in

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<sup>36</sup> The total population of the city was believed to range between 40,000 and 45,000 inhabitants; 30 per cent were slaves and the proportion of men to women was 1:10. Thus of the 16,000 men from which children under 16, men over 50 and the disabled must be subtracted, a figure of 8,000 free, able-bodied, adult males is left.

<sup>37</sup> For the year 1807, from the total budget of 3,372,709 pesos only 298,737 were assigned to political, economic, and religious branches of the administration. 3,073,972 pesos were destined for the war effort. Militiamen received wages when fully mobilized, and the total payment of the troops called for 1,862,996 pesos. Juan Biedma (ed.), *Antecedentes políticos, económicos y administrativos de la Revolución de Mayo de 1810*, (Buenos Aires: Archivo General de la Nación), vol. 1, p. 195.

<sup>38</sup> *Diario de un Soldado*, p. 72.

<sup>39</sup> Lyman Johnson, 'Manumission in colonial Buenos Aires, 1776-1810', *Hispanic American Historical Review* 59.2 (1979): 258-279.

<sup>40</sup> An important distinction has to be made between black slaves and black and mulatto free men. The latter, who comprised an important part of the urban lower classes, were involved in the general process of militarization. They were effectively organised in two ethnic units of 'Indians, Black and Mulattos', one of artillery and one of infantry, consisting of 426 and 352 men respectively. C. Roberts, *Las Invasiones*, pp. 232-3. George Reid Andrews, 'The Afro-Argentine Officers of Buenos Aires Province, 1800-1860', *The Journal of Negro History* 64.2 (1979): 85-100. There are no official accounts of a unit composed by slaves, but some documents show that knives and lances were prepared in order to arm them as a measure of last resort. Beverina, *El Virreynato*, p. 339.

reward.<sup>41</sup> But in the interval between the invasions, they were mostly occupied with economic tasks while the freemen trained and drilled.

Nevertheless, the massive mobilization of the citizens for the city's defence comprised a serious disruption of the normal course of civilian affairs, and the organization of the space and time of social life had to be altered in order for the military transformation to occur. The opening times of shops and workshops were delayed for several hours to allow the early morning hours to be spent at training camps. The night hours were no longer devoted to rest, but were spent largely on patrolling and guard duties. Weekdays and holidays - everything - was subordinated to the military's rhythm of preparation. This society was living 'year one' of a post-reconquest era. As for the city's space, not only were the public buildings turned into military facilities, but every house became a fortified stronghold, every structural aspect of the city was now reassessed in terms of its defensive strong points or vulnerabilities. At every corner, on every street, in squares, vacant lots and market places, troops were practising manoeuvres, marching, shooting. From the daily accounts of *Diario de un Soldado* we know that almost every three days a public military ceremony was held. The air was constantly filled with the sound of drums and the scent of powder; the spectacle of uniforms and banners was omnipresent; this once-normal city had suddenly been turned into a military camp.

Furthermore, behind all these everyday changes lay a more subtle and profound transformation: behind the timetables and the financial considerations, social values were being shattered. The commercial and administrative city of Buenos Aires was rapidly becoming a warrior society, and social attitudes, discourses and accounts clearly reflected

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<sup>41</sup> Up to 70 manumissions to reward the slaves that had played a distinguished role in the defense took place in very emotive ceremonies. The authorities considered that 686 slaves had seen action. Many slaves, who had not received weapons from the government, fought with those taken from fallen British troops, thus arousing immediate concern of the authorities, who called for these guns to be handed in. Irene Diggs, 'The Negro in the Viceroyalty of the Rio de la Plata', *The Journal of Negro History* 36.3 (1951): 281-301.

this. Personal letters, official statements, children's games, and all forms of art produced during these months were dominated by the military values of courage, self-sacrifice and the pursuit of glory. A new model of man was taking shape. Old and new leaderships would henceforth be judged and legitimized with reference to military capability and combat prowess.

The new bottom-up and voluntary defensive system was sustained by the force of emulation. Buenos Aires had been turned into an arena where military attributes enjoyed maximum visibility. In this context, as our anonymous militiaman put it, 'the most important thing is to be renowned as the best warrior'.<sup>42</sup> Once this point of transformation was reached, the identification of the citizen with the warrior was inevitable. Many men, mostly wealthy, had deserted the city after the first attack. They were now welcomed back by their fellow city dwellers in order to share the burden of its defence. If they chose not to return before the second invasion, all their possessions would be confiscated and their names erased from every public registry, reflecting their status as 'bad citizens and traitors to the fatherland'.<sup>43</sup>

## **The Test**

This was the state of the population of the Rio de la Plata in July 1807, when the anticipated second expedition finally arrived. Only this time it was no pirate-like adventure, but a full scale invasion of twelve thousand men. In fact, following what could be considered as a typical pattern of war escalation, after the initial capture of Buenos Aires by the small expedition, substantial reinforcements were needed to secure their position and extend the invasion further. Given the public enthusiasm aroused in Britain by the news of the victory, the British government could not help but commit its support.

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<sup>42</sup> *Diario de un Soldado*, p. 107.

<sup>43</sup> 5 February 1807, 17 April 1807, *Acuerdos del extinguido Cabildo*, f. 142, 205.

After the reconquest of Buenos Aires by the Spanish-Americans, the issue had become a matter of national pride. What had begun as an act of disobedience by a marine commander was turning into a major national objective. The Cabinet sent several army divisions to the east bank of the Rio de la Plata, where every city had already been besieged and taken by force.

This impressive army, under the command of Lieutenant-General John Whitelocke, launched the final assault on Buenos Aires only eleven months after the defeat of its predecessor. An indecisive battle took place at the city gates, and the defenders retreated in disorder to the central square, where they prepared barricades, strongholds and ambushes. When the British battalions entered the city in multiple columns, they were caught in terrible crossfire from every roof and window. The battle lasted for hours and was fought bravely. The attackers got within sight of the city centre, but were decimated and finally forced to surrender with a loss of over 2,500 men who were killed, wounded or taken prisoner<sup>44</sup>. In his official report, Whitelocke attested that ‘every householder with his Negroes defended his dwelling, each of which was in itself a fortress; and it is not, perhaps, too much to say, that the whole male population of Buenos Ayres was employed in its defence’.<sup>45</sup> In fact, several witnesses state that they saw many women and children fighting, throwing stones and boiling water as the soldiers marched through the streets<sup>46</sup>.

The improbable outcome of this urban battle was thus the culmination of a rare extreme of total militarization. This extreme had been achieved through a type of

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<sup>44</sup> *The trial at large of Lieut. Gen. Whitelocke* (London: R.Faulder and Son, 1808), p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Copy of a letter from Lieut.-Gen. Whitelocke to the Right Honourable William Windham, Buenos Ayres, 10 July 1807’, *ibid.*, pp. 613-17.

<sup>46</sup> ‘Those who had not muskets, were armed with long knives, very like half scythes; boys were formed into companies, officered by lads of their own age, and trained to the use of the rifle. I saw one who had shot several of our riflemen, he was scarcely two feet high, and excited more surprise in me at his being able to fire a gun off, then in killing a man. Women next in men's clothes fought on the tops of the houses, which were covered with thousands of armed people.’ *A Narrative of the Expedition to, and the Storming of Buenos Ayres, by the British Army, by an officer attached to the expedition* (London: William Meyler, 1807), p. 14.

mobilization that included a total commitment of every social and economic resource, a relative democratization of the military structure, a shift in the social configuration of time and space, a heightening of military emulation and, most profoundly, a radical transformation of social values. As a result, the new social configuration excluded as unworthy of citizenship those men who did not fit into the new warrior model and the new reality of war; to be a man of peace was no longer an option.

## Conclusions

This article has approached the problem of war as a social phenomenon, concentrating on how imperial warfare can affect a local, peripheral society. In this sense, the case of Buenos Aires offers a striking example. Until 1806, the city had known neither external threats nor significant conflicts for more than a generation. Then, with no prior warning, it faced successive invasions in 1806, 1807 and a projected one in 1808.<sup>47</sup> The sudden appearance of the first British force – one that would penetrate to the very centre of the city, unleashing war on the streets – shocked the local society, shattering established social attitudes regarding military life. The consequent military occupation of the city, the renewal of the external threat by the massive expedition of 1807, and the nearly-launched third expedition of 1808 further developed the process, ensuring that the changes were profound and long-lasting.

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<sup>47</sup> After the disastrous fate of the second expedition, British strategists decided that further operations in South America should include an offer of independence. This offer should nevertheless be accompanied by a strong military force, which would crush the colonial authorities. In the case of Rio de la Plata, it was decided that an expeditionary force would first attack Montevideo in late 1808, and then try to surrender Buenos Aires without entering the city. Arthur Wellesley himself was in charge of this project and the units assigned to the campaign were gathered at Cork. The Spanish uprisings against the French, and the calling for help from the Juntas, changed the destination of this expedition to Peninsular Spain: the Peninsular War began. For the Rio de la Plata's people, however, this aborted expedition still had important effects, since its menace forced the continuation of the military mobilization. Roberts, *Las Invasiones*, pp. 421-437.

But this transformation of the local society cannot be explained by the presence of an external threat alone. The first British invasion did more than just conquer the city. It destroyed, to a large extent, the colonial defensive system itself – first by capturing most of the veteran officers who served on the capital, and then by irreparably damaging the prestige and legitimacy of the colonial military forces in the eyes of the civilian population. Under these circumstances, if the enemy was going to be driven from the city's streets, the task inevitably would fall to the local population. The necessary mobilization was then attempted under a new model which differed from the colonial one. The improvised army was in large measure a direct expression of the city – with its geographical, ethnic and internal social structure – and it fought as such, for its own life and its own glory. Whereas the colonial army had struggled to enlist a few hundred willing soldiers, the city in arms could mobilize thousands of enthusiastic warriors.

The British invasions of the Rio de la Plata thus showed the enormous power of war as a catalyst of change. In a matter of months, the city's people had fought several dramatic pitched urban battles, each inhabitant fighting to defend his own house, life, and family. This experience not only increased the willingness of the local population to participate in the military; it also unleashed a process that put warfare at the centre of social life for many decades. Many aspects of this process were still embryonic in the period covered by this chapter, but they nevertheless were important and prefigured some characteristics that would become dominant in the Rio de la Plata landscape. From a political perspective, for instance, the mere fact that most of the men in town were now armed and trained directly challenged the traditional power relationships of the colonial society. Not only did the men of this city in arms vote to elect the officers who would take them to combat but, in a pattern that would be repeated, they had the strength and will to depose the designated authorities (e.g. the Viceroy) and replace them with their own military leaders. On the same note, political struggles would now be resolved

increasingly by direct military confrontation between units adopted by different political factions.<sup>48</sup>

From a general perspective, the events examined here demonstrate that the spreading potential of war goes far beyond the will and control of political and military decision makers. We have seen how war spread to South America with no official sanction of any government, but the process goes much further. The spark of war had been brought to the locals by fighters unwilling to remain idle at their post; the newly-mobilized South American warriors would not accept demobilization. The militia units formed to repel the British expeditions were to become the core of the revolutionary armies who fought the Independence Wars against the Spanish royalists; and then, when the newly-formed republics were free of imperial rule, they fought each other for decades. The warrior society whose birth is described here was not to be easily dismantled. It found a way to perpetuate war as a natural state and created a new societal involvement in war that would dominate South American landscapes for half a century.

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<sup>48</sup> As early as 1809, one half of the volunteer units created during the invasions fought the other in the central square of Buenos Aires to decide the continuity of Liniers' government. A year later, the triumphant 'American' units would depose the Viceroy, beginning the revolution and the Independence War.