British Journal for Military History

Volume 12, Issue 3, November 2026

Review of *Infantry in Battle, 1733-83* by Alexander S. Burns

Adam L Storring

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 20 November 2026

Citation: Adam L Storring, 'Review of *Infantry in Battle, 1733-83* by Alexander S. Burns', *British Journal for Military History*, 12.3 (2026), pp. 290-292.

www.bjmh.org.uk

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

The BJMH is produced with the support of Goldsmiths UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Alexander S Burns, *Infantry in Battle, 1733-1783*. Warwick: Helion, 2025. 222 pp. 4 maps. ISBN 978-1804515433 (hardback). Price £35.00.

Alexander Burns's fascinating book is a social history of military tactics. He builds on research that has fundamentally changed our understanding of common soldiers in the eighteenth century, rejecting long-held ideas that they were tricked into service, then kept in the ranks only by brutal discipline. In his 2017 book *Motivation in War*, Ilya Berkovich showed that eighteenth-century military discipline involved negotiation between officers and men. Burns shows how this negotiated authority worked in battle. In their 2020 book *Prussian Army Soldiers and the Seven Years War*, Katrin and Sascha Möbius demonstrated that 'tactical decisions were made in a triangle between the high command, the officers on the spot and the men in the ranks, whereby the latter had the last say' (p.128). Burns expands on such findings. He describes the positive motivations that inspired many eighteenth-century soldiers, and he presents eighteenth-century infantry tactics as a process of negotiation between officers and men.

Given the weapons technology of the time, eighteenth-century officers typically wanted their troops to fire only when they got very close to the enemy, or to attack with the bayonet without firing at all. Burns describes, however, how common soldiers often preferred to shoot from distance, ideally from behind cover. 'Troops . . . were begged, cajoled, and threatened into holding their fire as long as they could bear'. However, 'a wide gulf remained between what officers hoped was theoretically possible and what soldiers actually practiced on the battlefield' (p.155).

Burns portrays the eighteenth century as a period of persistent tension between a 'more intuitive style of fighting' that 'made sense to the infantry soldiers who took part' and alternative approaches which emphasized strict discipline and control (p.81) He argues that the musket of the period was more accurate than has sometimes been recognized. Soldiers were trained to aim when firing and could hit a specific human target at a range of 100 yards. Often, 'the side which embraced the realities of eighteenth-century infantry combat, rather than the side which attempted to use preconceived notions regarding intimidating bayonet attacks, emerged victorious' (p.196).

The eighteenth century is famous as the era when well-drilled troops manoeuvred in tight formations, often marching in step. Burns shows, however, that eighteenth-century soldiers could also break out of their rigid formations to respond to the circumstances of battle. It was 'incredibly common' for eighteenth-century troops to lie down under fire (p. 158). Burns presents examples of soldiers ducking down when

the enemy fired, then standing up to fire back. He also describes how, to catch up with other units or to reach the enemy line quicker, eighteenth-century infantry might break ranks, moving quickly or even running on the battlefield.

Burns also contributes to work showing that many of the military methods of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars were already in use in the preceding decades. French revolutionary armies are famous for using skirmishers to provide fire support for line infantry. Burns, however, provides evidence of this practice already in the Seven Years War, and demonstrates its widespread use by 'Hessian' units in the American Revolutionary War. He also notes that the deeper and more manoeuvrable column formations associated with French revolutionary armies had already been used on the battlefield by the Austrians in the Seven Years War.

Burns's study is ambitious, examining battlefields across Europe and North America from 1733 to 1783, using material from numerous archives in Britain, Germany and the United States. Given such admirable breadth of perspective, it may seem churlish to ask for more. Nevertheless, by starting in 1733, Burns raises questions about the situation before then. The age of the flintlock musket and socket bayonet started in the late seventeenth century, not the mid eighteenth. Burns argues that the 1733-5 War of the Polish Succession 'began a unique period of infantry battle' (p.176). However, without detailed discussion of the period before, the reader cannot judge whether this was in fact the case. Burns describes the 'Prussomania' which swept Europe in the later eighteenth century in response to the successes of Frederick the Great. He argues that the Prussians were crucial in fostering ideas that soldiers should be subjected to exact discipline and move like clockwork. Certainly, the Prussians re-introduced the practice of marching in step. However, the cult of order had existed across Europe and its armies from the mid seventeenth century. Burns himself notes that Humphrey Bland – whose 1727 work codified British methods from the age of Marlborough – presented similar principles to those of the Prussians. And what about Louis XIV's famous drillmaster Jean Martinet? Hopefully, future scholarship will integrate the Nine Years War and War of the Spanish Succession with the later period to give us a more comprehensive understanding of the realities of infantry combat in the age of the flintlock musket.

In a study of the mechanics of combat, I would have liked to see some mention of John Keegan's classic 1976 work *The Face of Battle*, which really defined the field. Burns notes his debt to Rory Muir, and it would have been nice if he had engaged with Muir's 1998 book *Tactics and the Experience of Battle in the Age of Napoleon*, which emphasized, as Burns does, the difference between drill manuals and the practical reality of combat. When Burns describes soldiers' anxieties about hand-to-hand combat, and discusses infantry's experiences facing cavalry, he is substantially paralleling what Keegan and

Muir said, and this reviewer would have liked to see him stand a bit more securely on the shoulders of previous giants.

Nevertheless, Burns has written an important book, which will be essential reading for all those who want to understand what battle was really like in the eighteenth century. Those researching the experience of combat in more recent periods should also take careful note.

ADAM L. STORRING
King's College London, UK
DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v12i3.2008