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The “Decisive” Battle of Ramillies, 1706: Prerequisites for Decisiveness in Early Modern Warfare

Jamel Ostwald

FALLING between the campaigns of Gustavus Adolphus and Frederick the Great, the continental wars of Louis XIV have traditionally been of little interest to military historians. The one exception is the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14); the one exceptional commander, John Churchill, first Duke of Marlborough, English captain-general and commander of Allied armies. Allied with the Austrian Habsburgs, the Dutch Republic, and a host of minor allies, Marlborough led the charge against not only Bourbon France and Spain, but also against conventional notions of how war was to be waged. He sought quick and decisive battlefield victories rather than remain content with the slow pace of sieges. His quest for decisive battle reached fruition, say his biographers, in his victory at Ramillies on 23 May 1706. According to their narratives of the campaign, the battle destroyed the Spanish Netherlands by forcing its major fortresses to surrender without a fight.1 The results of this one victory validated Marlborough’s battle-seeking strategy, illustrating battle’s potential for decision.

The constant repetition of this theme is at odds with the outlook of many other military historians of the early modern era who have abandoned the belief in “decisive” battles and instead stress the role of fortresses and logistics in limiting military mobility. That Ramillies could eliminate the need for sieges in the well-fortified Flanders theater is a

* I would like to thank John Lynn, John Rule, John Guilmartin, Geoffrey Parker, and the anonymous readers for their comments on various drafts of this article.

1. From 1706 to the end of the war, modern-day Belgium was administered jointly by the British and the Dutch. At the Peace of Utrecht, the southern Netherlands was transferred to the Austrian emperor.
paradox. Marlborough’s proponents resolve the paradox of pursuit in a fortified theater by arguing that the stopping power of fortresses was as much psychological as physical. Once a commander was willing to see beyond the confines of a conventional siege strategy, decision could be returned to warfare. But does the 1706 campaign really support the view that eighteenth-century military strategy was indecisive by choice rather than by necessity? The importance of Marlborough to Anglo-American military history and Ramillies’s implications for the larger issue of decisiveness in early modern warfare demand that we reconcile these two views.

The Battle-Siege Dichotomy in Marlborough Historiography

Popular and scholarly treatments of the War of the Spanish Succession remain entrenched in “great commanders” biography. In the English-language literature, only Marlborough’s campaigns (1702–3, 1705–11 in Flanders; 1704 in Germany) have won serious attention. Narratives of these campaigns construct a strict dichotomy between Marlborough’s pursuit of a decisive battle strategy and his contemporaries’ reliance on a strategy of indecisive sieges.

One of Marlborough’s greatest virtues, according to his proponents, was his willingness to seek out the enemy’s field army and force it to fight. Precedents for Napoleon’s strategy of annihilation are found in

2. Just as the British have paid almost exclusive attention to Marlborough, so too have Austrian and French historians focused on their own battle-seeking generals, Prince Eugene of Savoy for the Habsburgs and Marshal Claude Louis Hector Villars for France. Recent English-language works include Derek McKay, Prince Eugene of Savoy (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), and Claude Sturgill, Marshal Villars and the War of the Spanish Succession (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965).

Marlborough's frequent references to his quest for battle and his belief that a single grand-scale battle would end the war. David Chandler, the preeminent Marlburian scholar, whose two books on the Duke have recently been reprinted, praised Marlborough's search for decisiveness: "From first to last he was the proponent of the major battle as the sole means to break an enemy's military power and thus his will to resist." J. R. Jones, the Duke's most recent biographer, agreed, writing that Marlborough's strategic thinking demanded that "French military predominance must be destroyed, or at least reduced, and only through winning set-piece battles against their main armies could this be achieved."

4. Almost all of Marlborough's outgoing correspondence is available in three printed collections: letters between Marlborough and the Dutch Grand Pensionary Anthonius Heinsius in B. van 't Hoff, ed., The Correspondence 1701–1711 of John Churchill, First Duke of Marlborough and Anthonie Heinsius Grand Pensionary of Holland (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1951), hereafter Marlborough-Heinsius Correspondence; letters exchanged with his wife Sarah and his close friend the Lord Treasurer Sidney Godolphin, in Henry Snyder, ed., The Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); and miscellaneous other letters in George Murray, ed., Letters and Dispatches of John Churchill, First Duke of Marlborough from 1702 to 1712, 5 vols. (London: John Murray, 1845), hereafter Letters and Dispatches. Other letters to and from Marlborough are located in the Blenheim Papers, now at the British Library. For examples of Marlborough's opinions on battle and its expected results, see Snyder, ed., Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1: 204 letter #197, 1: 224–26 #218–19 (1703); 1: 436 #448 (1705); 3: 1359 #1391 (1709); 3: 1491 #1528, 3: 1513 #1549 (1710); 3: 1673 #1760 (1711); as well as van 't Hoff, ed., Marlborough-Heinsius Correspondence, 199 #318 and 203 #324 (1705).


Marlborough's position as the battle-seeker of his generation is firmly entrenched in the historical literature.\(^7\)

The corollary of praising Marlborough's quest for battle is condemning his peers, including his Dutch allies, who supposedly lacked the will to fight. On the many occasions when Marlborough was in a position to fight a battle but did not, his allies receive the blame. John Fortescue wrote that "we possess only the wreck of many of Marlborough's finest combinations, shattered, just as they were entering port, against the rocks of Dutch stupidity and German conceit."\(^8\) Chandler agreed: "Marlborough suffered greatly from the restrictions imposed by Dutch field deputies and obstructive generals. Under the circumstances it is amazing that he achieved so much."\(^9\) Constrained by "veritable political commissars" (the field deputies), recalcitrant generals, and selfish German princes, the Duke's diplomacy and tact allowed him to tolerate his confederates' "unreasonable" demands.\(^10\)

Following this view, Dutch generals chose instead the "unimaginative and conventional approach" of positional warfare, "a strategy of evasion."\(^11\) There is much agreement with Henry Guerlac's early formulation: "The strategic imagination of all but a few exceptional commanders was walled in by the accepted axioms of a war of sieges .... [They] accepted unconditionally this doctrine of the strategic primacy of the siege."\(^12\) As


9. Chandler, Marlborough as Military Commander, 322. In "England's Greatest Soldier," 58–59, Chandler blamed "doubting governments and hesitant allies" for Marlborough's failure to give battle on a dozen occasions; also see Marlborough as Military Commander, 63. Jones also attributes Marlborough's occasional failures to his lack of authority over the Dutch (Marlborough, 100–101), although he is generally more sympathetic to the Dutch perspective (e.g., 228–29). See also C. T. Atkinson, "Marlborough's Sieges," Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research 13 (1935): 195.

10. Chandler, Marlborough as Military Commander, 99, see also 131. This tension between Marlborough's quest for battle and his allies' obstruction is a constant theme in the narratives of Marlborough's campaigns (101). With extremely few exceptions, Allied defeats are said to result from Dutch, German, Austrian, and Tory failures to follow Marlborough's plans, while Marlborough receives the credit for the Allied victories.


this quote suggests, the strategy one pursued depended on a philosophical inclination: throughout the literature, military strategy is presented as a “preference,” a “passion,” a “conviction,” or an “attitude.” This choice may even have been dictated by intellectual ability, as historians occasionally contrast those battle-seeking commanders of “genius” with their “mediocre” peers.13

Although Marlborough preferred battles to sieges, his supporters are not blind to the fact that the Allies fought thirty sieges under his command and only four major battles.14 They justify this record by arguing that these sieges were forced on the unwilling commander by his Dutch allies.15 And while they bemoan the many sieges he was forced to undertake, his biographers make a virtue out of this vice, praising the breadth of Marlborough’s genius for his success in both battles and sieges.16

Despite the obstruction of hesitant allies, Marlborough is said to have imposed his “will to battle” on friend and foe alike on several occa-

14. For example, ibid., 234.
15. Chandler wrote that Marlborough “was often forced by his Allies or overall circumstances into undertaking numerous sieges in the Flanders theater.” Marlborough as Military Commander, 63. On several occasions, Marlborough made clear his preference for battle over sieges, e.g. Snyder, ed., Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1: 205 #197; Murray, ed., Letters and Dispatches, 5: 442.
16. This is encapsulated in the oft-cited contemporary saying that Marlborough won every battle he fought and captured every town he besieged. Dennis Showalter summed up the conventional wisdom, writing that Marlborough was “no less a master of siege and maneuver” than battle, entry on “Churchill” in Marsha and Linda Frey, eds., Treaties of the War of the Spanish Succession: An Historical and Critical Dictionary (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1995), 108. The extremes to which defenses of Marlborough can be taken are illustrated in Marlborough as Military Commander, 323, where Chandler, after spending the entire book focusing on Marlborough’s quest for battle and the decision it would bring, responds to the criticism of Marlborough restricting his efforts to the Flanders theater (and thereby dooming himself to siege warfare) by contending that this theater was perfect for an attritional struggle against France, and that such a strategy would have succeeded were it not for the “Spanish ulcer.” In one page Marlborough is transformed: from a decisive battle-seeker too often forced into sieges by his allies, he changes into a conventional strategist who recognized the potential for victory through attritional siege warfare. The incongruity is striking.
17. Hew Strachan, European Armies and the Conduct of War (London: Allen and Unwin, 1983), 14. See also Jones, Marlborough, 231, 232; Scott, “Marlborough,” 287; Childs, Nine Years’ War, 44; M. Ashley, Marlborough (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 61; Ivan Phelan, “Marlborough as Logistician,” Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research 68 (1990): 257. Black, briefly citing Ramillies among other “decisive” battles, concluded that “determination and willpower as much as purely military aspects were, as is so often the case, crucially important to decisiveness,” in European Warfare, 1660–1815, 76.
He “burst like a ray of bright light” onto the European scene in 1702, seizing the initiative and forcing warfare out of its conventional mold. The U.S. Military Academy textbook posits a simplistic conception of positional strategy and contrasts it with Marlborough’s “revolutionary” warfare:

It was an era dominated by the negativeness of the defensive. . . . On such a stage strode Marlborough and Eugene, both having formed unusual opinions: that wars were to be won, that armies were to fight, that the initiative was to be seized and maintained, and that the enemy army was the supreme objective. These were strange ideas, bold ideas, thoughts too revolutionary for warfare in the Age of Reason; but they engendered concepts that bore the seeds of victory and barred the indecision of stalemate.

On those occasions when Marlborough won the unfettered authority he deserved, victory was the result. When his plans had to be submitted for allied approval, there was only stalemate.

Marlborough’s popularity stems from his success in demonstrating that battles could be strategically decisive on the offensive. His supporters do not claim that his battles ended the war, as a strict definition of “decisive” battle might require. Chandler, however, does imply that battle very well could have been war-winning, had Marlborough been allowed the freedom of action his genius merited. Although the war continued, Marlborough’s field victories at Blenheim and Ramillies were still strategically decisive, his biographers all agree, even if their influence was largely limited to their respective theaters. Exploitation after Ramillies in particular has been hailed as a masterpiece of postbattle pursuit, Marlborough’s “greatest success.” Most recently, Ronald Love

18. Childs, Nine Years’ War, 326. Jones wrote that Marlborough developed the “tactical and strategic ingenuity” to “shatter” the conventions and rules of traditional warfare, Marlborough, 56.


21. Narrating the 1705 campaign, Chandler concluded that the almost-fought battle at the Yssche River would have been “potentially his greatest victory” and “might even have ended the war,” Marlborough as Military Commander, 164. See also his comments in “Armies and Navies” in J. S. Bromley, ed., The New Cambridge Modern History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 6: 752.

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echoed the conventional view of its results: "a dozen major fortresses capitulated without resistance, so demoralized were their garrisons."\(^2\) The results of Blenheim in 1704 were also considerable, but postbattle pursuit in the poorly fortified Bavarian theater cannot illustrate battle's potential to eliminate the need for sieges. The Ramillies campaign, on the other hand, can be used to refute the argument that logistical limitations were inescapable. France's loss of the Spanish Netherlands is attributed to victory at Ramillies and unremitting pursuit, affirming the validity of a battle-seeking strategy in even the most heavily fortified of theaters.

Battle's offensive potential is contrasted with the attritional stalemate of siege warfare. Marlburian scholars have described sieges as "leisurely," "overcautious," "rigid," and "tedious."\(^2\) This type of warfare has also been called "somewhat disheartening and mentally deadening," a "staid, bloodless chess match," and even an "abortive" form of warfare.\(^2\) Sieges are further marginalized by narratives and generalizations that consistently revolve around the success or failure of Marlborough's quest for battle.\(^2\) As their presentation makes clear, scholars contend that a strategy relying on sieges was doomed to indecision.

This battle-centric view of early modern warfare (with "great captains" such as Marlborough at its center) has not gone unchallenged. Recent early modern historians have undermined the theory of the decisive battle with their studies of logistics and fortifications. As first

\(^2\) Love, "Ramillies," 372–73. Love probably drew this observation from Chandler, who wrote in *Art of Warfare in the Age of Marlborough*, 245, that "a dozen major fortresses fell into Allied hands in the space of three weeks, only the garrison of Ostend offering even token resistance." Derek McKay, in his work on Prince Eugene of Savoy, devoted only one sentence to Ramillies, but it summarizes the conventional wisdom on the results: "Here Villeroy's army had been smashed . . . and was retreating in disorder, leaving the whole of the Spanish Netherlands, and possibly France itself, open to the Anglo-Dutch army." McKay, *Prince Eugene of Savoy*, 99. In "The Great Captain-General," 73, Chandler wrote that after Ramillies, the "whole of the Spanish Netherlands lay at the mercy of the Allied army." See also Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, 179; Chandler, "John Churchill, First Duke of Marlborough," 217; Chandler, "Armies and Navies," 725; Atkinson, "Marlborough's Sieges," 196.

\(^2\) Guerlac, "Vauban: The Impact of Science on War," 79; Britt et al., *Dawn of Modern Warfare*, 89.


\(^2\) Chandler summarized Marlborough's career thus: "he forced four major battles and two important actions on evasive foes and unwilling allies alike," in "John Churchill, First Duke of Marlborough," 215; McJoynt also concluded that "Marlborough's accomplishments can be summarized by four great battles," entry on "Marlborough," in *Brassey's Encyclopedia*, 657. See also M. Ashley, *Marlborough*, 62.
described by Géza Perjés and Jean Milot, the logistical demands of supplying large armies severely restricted mobility, limiting pursuit to an advance of only one day out of every three.\textsuperscript{27} Pursuit would end even more abruptly in a well-fortified theater, since even a victorious army could not afford to bypass unmolested garrisons without risking its supply lines.\textsuperscript{28} In the “heartland” of Geoffrey Parker’s military revolution, the Low Countries would be the last place to expect an unhindered advance past numerous strong fortresses.

But an appreciation of early modern logistical limitations has not forced a reconsideration of Marlborough’s campaigns. To the contrary, illustrating the extreme limitations in heavily fortified theaters only accentuates Marlborough’s success after Ramillies. Adapting Perjés’s argument, Chandler explained that “the Duke of Marlborough was unique in the way he adjusted to, and even largely overcame, the obstacles placed in the way of waging effective warfare under the prevalent conditions of his day.”\textsuperscript{29} Even in recent works which emphasize the stopping power of fortresses, Ramillies, following the Marlborough literature, continues to be presented as an example of the strategically decisive battle whose war-ending potential was constrained and localized only by the divisive nature of coalition warfare.\textsuperscript{30}


\textsuperscript{29} Chandler, \textit{Marlborough as Military Commander}, 61.

\textsuperscript{30} Weigley argued generally that Vauban’s fortresses saved France (\textit{Age of Battles}, 54), but later concluded that Ramillies “assured the conquest of virtually all the Spanish Netherlands” (92). For other historians who contrast the local success of
If in the wake of Ramillies Marlborough captured some of Europe's strongest fortresses without a siege, we might conclude with some justification that decisiveness in early modern warfare was limited as much by the desire to avoid battle as by any logistical constraints. But as a closer examination will reveal, the traditional view of Marlborough's battles ignores two important prerequisites for decisiveness. First, fighting a grand-scale battle required mutual consent, not just Marlborough's unilateral "will to battle." Second, the continuing infatuation with decisive battle blinds Marlborough's proponents to the fact that even success after Ramillies was dependent on conditions unrelated to the battlefield. Ramillies is only a partial explanation for the successes of the 1706 campaign.

Was Battle a Choice?

On each occasion when Marlborough did fight a Flanders battle, his "will to battle" was a necessary prerequisite to force battle. As an examination of his three grand-scale battles indicates, and as even Marlburists concede in their narratives,31 the French accepted each opportunity for battle. When the French refused to fight, the supremacy of the tactical defensive made battle difficult for even Marlborough to force.

Each battle was prefaced by a period of uncertainty. Although Marlborough wanted to fight in 1706, he predicted indecision: "there will be very little action, for the French will not venture [a battle] in this country unless they have a very great superiority, which I do not think is likely."32 Before the battle of Oudenaarde (11 July 1708), Marlborough once again sought a battle that would end the war. But as he explained to Godolphin: "if they send [the Duke of Burgundy to command the army], they think themselves strong enough to act offensively, by which

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31. For Ramillies, see Chandler, Marlborough as Military Commander, 170-71; Oudenaarde (1708) is a difficult case because of the piecemeal commitment of both sides' forces; for Malplaquet (1709) see ibid., 251. These admissions, buried in the operational narratives, have no effect upon the traditional conclusion that Marlborough "forced" battle on the unwilling French.

we may have action.”33 Before the battle of Malplaquet (11 September 1709), Marlborough was still dreaming of battle, but expected to be denied once again: “The scituation of this country is such that Prince Eugene and myself think it impossible to force the Mareshalle to a bat-tel, so that we are taking our measures for another siege.”34 Only on the tenth of September, after receiving intelligence that the French were approaching, did he mention his own plan to fight, hoping that “if they persist, it may give us an opportunity of coming soon to a battle.”35 In each of these instances, Marlborough explicitly recognized that it was the French who chose to accept battle.

Louis XIV, for his part, approved of battle on each occasion as well. Pressured in 1706 by increasing financial and military strains, Louis hoped to convince the Allies of the futility of continuing the war by launching military offensives in all four theaters.36 Confident in his troops, Louis granted Marshal Villeroi permission to fight a battle in order to ensure the recapture of Zoutleeuw (Léau).37 In 1708, Louis wrote to his grandson, the Duke of Burgundy, and Marshal Vendôme that battle would be acceptable, but only in terrain where they could take advantage of their superiority in cavalry.38 In the year of Malplaquet, Louis told Villars: “I leave to you the freedom to attack and fight them when you can do so advantageously, I consider that it is always better not to be forced to fight but to choose the occasion yourself.”39 Though hesitant to risk a grand-scale battle at a disadvantage, Louis could conceive of situations where battle would serve his purposes.

In addition to Louis’s approval, the French commanders also had to want to fight. At Ramillies, Marlborough himself noted that the French

33. Snyder, ed., Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 2: 977–78 #980, 978 #981, 1014 #1020, 964 #964, also 990 #995.
34. Ibid., 3: 1351 #1384. See also André Corvisier’s recent monograph on the battle, La bataille de Malplaquet 1709: L’effondrement de la France (Paris: Economica, 1997).
35. Snyder, ed., Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 3: 1359 #1391; Murray, ed, Letters and Dispatches, 4: 102, also 101.
37. Mémoires militaires, 6: 17.
38. Ibid., 8: 9. Louis referred to the terrain between the Lys and Scheldt rivers as being particularly bad for horses. An advisor to the French Secretary of War, Michel Chamillart, counseled: “I am very sure that if the King’s army engages the enemy’s army, all the dispositions being well made so that all the troops can engage and support each other, the King’s army will never be beaten,” G. Esnault, ed., Correspondence et papiers inédits, 2 vols. (Paris: A. Picard, 1885), 2: 261–62.
“came with the same intentions I had of fighting.” In 1708, both Burgundy and Vendôme accepted the possibility of battle, but after the French and Allied vanguards encountered each other at Oudenaarde, only Vendôme’s wing engaged. In the days before Malplaquet, Villars assembled the army to “seek to fight the enemy.” And although he would have preferred to fight where his cavalry had the advantage, he was optimistic nonetheless. French generals usually obeyed the first rule of battle: “a General ... always ought to give Battle in Consequence of his own voluntary Choice, and endeavour to prevent his Enemy from forcing upon him that important Action.” The common sense of such a maxim should need no comment, but historians have confused adherence to this axiom with a virtual dread of battle. Few defensive-minded commanders would refuse battle under the most advantageous conditions, just as few offensive-minded commanders would seek battle under the most disadvantageous conditions.

When Marlborough failed to realize his hopes for battle, the Dutch were not alone to blame. Were only a simple change in military strategy required, grand-scale battles might indeed have been more common. The Duke’s battle-seeking strategy was incapable of surmounting the

40. Snyder, ed., Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1: 545 #563; Mémoires militaires, 6: 20; also Villeroi’s letter of justification to Louis after the battle. Also H. H. E. Craster, ed., “Letters of the First Lord Orkney during Marlborough’s Campaigns,” English Historical Review 19 (1904): 315. Cranstoun mentioned the poor judgment of Villeroi that led the French “in confidence of their strength to forsake their true interest and all the wise and prudent rules by which they usually walk to come out without their lines and force us to fight them at Ramillies.” Portland MSS, 4: 441.


strength of the tactical defensive—like his peers, he too failed to overcome fortified defenses and tactical limitations.45

The first limitation on the frequency of battle was the nature of the theater. The Low Countries' terrain was ideal for defensive entrenchments anchored on rivers and other topographical features.46 The Allies appreciated the tactical strength of such entrenchments, as can be seen from an Allied correspondent who explained that the French had posted themselves behind their lines at St. Job, "where I fear tis impossible for us to Meddle with them. . . . They had left us a clear stage. . . . and now I begin to fear we shall do nothing this Year, because we can't come at the Enemy or any of their Towns. This is the general Opinion."47 Private John Marshall Deane bragged that "the French doth really think that they have no business to stand against us in the field except they have eyther a ligne or breastwork, a wood or a wall, before them to cover them,"48 but Lieutenant-Colonel Cranstoun, in contrast, wrote more soberly that

as this whole country has everywhere such natural strengths of rivers, woods or morasses, as it is easy for a weaker army so to post themselves either in Brabant, Flanders, or Hainault as that they cannot be attacked even by a better and stronger army without the greatest disadvantage and a manifest hazard of losing a battle, so while it shall be the enemy's interest not to fight, we can never hope to bring them to a battle.49

After all, "every military man knows that it is not an easy thing to rout an army which has had time to choose its situation, and has excellent

45. Ivor Burton, alone among Marlborough's biographers, concludes that the evidence is "inconclusive" as to whether Marlborough could force battle on an unwilling enemy or not. The Captain-General: The Career of John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, from 1702 to 1711 (London: Constable, 1968), 198.


49. Portland MSS, 4: 442.
Field fortifications that took advantage of natural obstacles foiled Marlborough's plans on numerous occasions.

Even if the French came out from behind their entrenchments, a battle was far from assured. Marlborough shared a second limitation with his peers: an inability to shift quickly enough from march formation to battle order. This transition from march to battle was a time-consuming process, particularly as army sizes approached one hundred thousand men. Acknowledged by contemporaries and historians alike, the challenge lay in organizing the army into long, unwieldy linear formations—a task that might take hours—while, at the same time, ensuring that the enemy did not flee the scene. The French frequently took advantage of this delay when threatened with battle. In 1703 the Allies passed the Geer River without French knowledge, but as Marlborough explained: "Villeroy gote his army soe soon under march that wee had no actions, and thay are now gote into soe enclosed a country, and so near the lins, that I think their is noe prospect of any action." When the Duke tricked the French into leaving their lines in 1707, he could not be certain they would remain exposed long enough for him to force a battle:

The Duke immediately ordered Count Tilly to advance with the horse and fall on their rear and by that means keep them engaged till the foot should come up. But Tilly could do nothing in the enclosures as he had none but horse: and the foot being fatigued, could not come up, so Vendôme marched off at his leisure.

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50. Memoirs of the Marshal Duke of Berwick, 177. The Dutch General Albemarle noted in 1710 that "if the enemies do not want to risk combat, then we cannot force them, since they will always be able to avoid it, and in this case we will do nothing more than lose time running after them without achieving our objective." Briefwechsel Heinsius, 10: 500 #1004.

51. Chandler, Art of Warfare in the Age of Marlborough, 110; Christopher Duffy, The Military Experience in the Age of Reason (New York: Atheneum, 1988), 198-204. In addition to the increase in the size of overall military establishments, Allied field armies: grew from 62,000 men at Ramillies to 80,000 at Oudenaarde to 110,000 at Malplaquet (Chandler's figures in Art of Warfare in the Age of Marlborough, Appendix 2).

52. Strachan, European Armies and the Conduct of War, 15-17. The Allies required three hours to prepare their battle order at Ramillies. Snyder, ed., Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1: 545 #563.

53. Snyder, ed., Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1: 207. To the Duchess he wrote: "Since wee had noe action yesterday, I believe wee shall have none this campagne, for the French are now in a very strong country, and can goe behind their lins when thay please," ibid., 207 #200, also 209 #202.

54. Chandler, ed., Robert Parker and the Comte de Mérode-Westerloo, 67; Major J. Cranstoun in the Portland MSS, 4: 443. After passing the Scheldt River in 1708, Allied infantry without cavalry were just as unable to capture a retreating enemy. Additional Manuscripts (hereafter Add MSS) 61312 f. 189, Blenheim Papers, British Library, London.
Linear battle tactics maximized firepower in combat but made battle more difficult to force. Consequently, Marlborough lost several more opportunities to fight. Although the Dutch refused to attack on several occasions, French entrenchments and linear tactics were just as effective at denying battle.

The results of such operational and tactical constraints went beyond the occasional lost opportunity for battle. Entire campaigns degenerated into marching and camping, as Marlborough futilely sought to force the French to fight. In 1703, Marlborough wrote that he would “take all occasions of venturing a battle this campagne, if I can ever find them in a situation where wee may hope for success,” but his Great Design failed to force the French into battle.\(^55\) The Allies were “reduced to consume the whole summer in marching and countermarching before the enemy’s lines, and with difficulty in the close took the two poor small places of Huy and Limbourg.”\(^56\) Battle failed to materialize and sieges were Marlborough’s only recourse.

Despite expectations of overrunning Lorraine and marching to the gates of Paris, the Allies likewise spent the first part of 1705 idle, since Villars refused to leave his lines behind the Moselle and Marlborough was unwilling to attack.\(^57\) Returning to the Flanders theater to halt a French offensive, Marlborough forced the French to abandon the siege of Liège but failed to follow up his passage of the lines of Brabant.\(^58\) The Allies ended this campaign by retaking Huy and capturing Léau: “And so this campaign ended almost where it had begun” as the Count of Mérode-Westerloo described it.\(^59\) Grandiose hopes of a war-ending campaign once again gave way to stalemate, maneuver, and sieges.

Marlborough achieved even less in 1707, the most unproductive of his ten campaigns. Cranstoun again described how the French army equalled our numbers and though they did not find it meet to fight us yet, by taking up in time a strong and advantageous camp they have kept us at bay upon our part of the country the whole campaign

\(^{55}\) Snyder, ed., *Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence*, 1: 214 #206.


\(^{57}\) Marlborough wrote to Godolphin: “Nothing is capable of giving us much ease but a battaile, which I am afraid the French will not venture.” Snyder, ed., *Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence*, 1: 439 #451.

\(^{58}\) Cranstoun in the *Portland MSS*, 4: 443–44. To the usual criticism of Dutch bickering and jealousy, Chandler adds a jab at Marlborough for not following up the crossing of the Brabant lines, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, 162.

and put it out of our power now to undertake anything for the rest of this year.  
Three campaigns were “wasted” as Marlborough vainly sought to bring the French to battle.  
By far the most common excuse for Marlborough’s inability to fight more battles is Dutch obstruction. Dutch generals and field deputies both receive harsh criticism for their frequent vetoes of Marlborough’s plans. Too large a subject to examine in detail, a few general observations should be made nonetheless.  
First, a perusal of the large number of English-language works on Marlborough will turn up the surprising fact that none bother to consult the secondary literature written by Dutch historians, much less delve into Dutch primary sources. J. W. Wijn’s three-volume narrative of the War of the Spanish Succession provides a much more balanced account of the war, yet it remains practically unknown among English readers. A. J. Veenendaal, Sr., wrote several works on the war, yet they also remain poorly known. Veenendaal illustrated the richness of Dutch sources to an English-reading audience in an article on the 1708 campaign, convincing Chandler to incorporate these revisions of the one-sided English treatment into his own narrative of the events of 1708.


61. The only Dutch primary source used with any frequency is the correspondence between Marlborough and Heinsius published by van ’t Hoff, presumably because all this correspondence is in English and French. Henry Snyder commented on this weakness in the introduction to his Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1: xxii-xxiii. A. J. Veenendaal, Jr.’s, publication of fourteen volumes of Heinsius’s correspondence in Brievenwisseling Heinsius has now eliminated any excuse for ignoring the Dutch perspective, assuming Anglophones can be convinced to learn Dutch.

62. Wijn, ed., Het Staatsche Leger. Chandler cites only volume seven in his Marlborough as Military Commander, even though the last part of volume eight on the War of the Spanish Succession had been published nine years before Marlborough as Military Commander.


64. Chandler, Marlborough as Military Commander, 211–12. Although Chandler does not cite Veenendaal’s “The Opening Phase of Marlborough’s Campaign of 1708 in the Netherlands” here, it is listed in the bibliography and is most likely the source of this revision. Chandler also made limited use of Veenendaal’s “The War of the Spanish Succession in Europe.”

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This example has not, unfortunately, convinced Marlborough's proponents to use Dutch sources for any of the other campaigns. It is difficult to understand how British historians could be content to scapegoat the Dutch without even bothering to look at Dutch accounts. Until they do so, their conclusions will be based on questionable foundations.

We should also note the Anglocentric dismissal of valid Dutch concerns. The Dutch have been criticized for avoiding battle, but they had reason to be cautious. After several previous close calls (e.g., Nijmegen 1702), they knew that losing a battle close to their homeland was dangerous without the protection of their barrier fortresses. Their predicament, generally acknowledged if only parenthetically, was exacerbated by the fact that Marlborough's skill as a general was at the start unknown, since he had never before commanded a large army. Nor did the Flanders engagements of the Nine Years' War support Marlborough's contention that battles could be decisive. How surprising is it then that the Dutch were not willing to let an Englishman risk Dutch troops in a battle that might lead to the occupation of Dutch territory? Instead the Dutch used sieges to regain their barrier, a goal which hardly demanded a risky battle.

Finally, Anglo-American criticisms of Dutch behavior drown out the immense contributions of the United Provinces to the war effort. Since the Dutch provided a majority of the troops in the Low Countries, they naturally insisted on participating in strategic and operational planning. Without the much-criticized Dutch field deputies, the army's logistical system would have collapsed, including that supporting Marlborough's vaunted 1704 march to the Danube. And when they "forced" Marlborough to undertake thirty sieges, they were the ones who provided the siege trains, munitions, and engineers for the task. Marlbor-

65. Jones, Marlborough, 56, 62–63. His skill as an overall commander in battle was not tested until Blenheim (1704), and even afterward some saw more luck in the victory than ability.


67. The Dutch were to provide 102,000 troops (60,000 for the field army) in 1702 and the English 40,000, or 40 percent of the total. Burton, Captain-General, 20–21. These figures eventually peaked at 137,000 Dutch and 75,000 British. In 1710, for example, the British were to provide 64 battalions of infantry and 80 squadrons of cavalry for Flanders, the Dutch 118 battalions and 118 squadrons. Add MSS 61317, register 2, ff. 241b–242, Blenheim Papers, British Library.

68. See the important work of Olaf van Nimwegen, De subsistentie van het leger: Logistiek en strategie van het Geallieerde en met name het Staatse leger tijdens de Spaanse Successoorlog in de Nederlanden en het Heilige Roomse Rijk (1701–1712) (Amsterdam: De Bataafsche Leeuw, 1995).
ough can hardly receive all the credit for Allied success while the Dutch get all the blame for Allied failures.

The dichotomy between Marlborough's consistent quest for battle and his peers' consistent evasion of battle is oversimplistic. Although the French and Dutch sought battle less often than Marlborough, battle occurred only when all parties willingly accepted the contest. When Marlborough wanted to fight a battle and the French did not, there was no grand-scale battle, although a part of the French army might have to be sacrificed (as at Elixhem in 1705) in order to avoid it. In short, it was extremely difficult to force an opponent to fight a large-scale battle in Flanders without mutual consent.

Was Battle Decisive?

Whether Marlborough could have fought more battles than he did is of little significance unless one assumes that their results would have been decisive. As his biographers admit, two of Marlborough's battles failed to realize their potential. Oudenaarde was expected to be decisive: the French lost a fifth of their force and Eugene's army arrived "ready to push on after this victory." The French retreat to Ghent (Gand) left "all France open" according to Marlborough.69 Yet he wished Louis would order the army south again, since French fortresses prevented a southern advance while to the north Vendôme occupied a position "from whence we are not able to force him but by famin."70 The Allies could prepare only for the siege of Lille.71 As for Malplaquet, even Marlborough's most ardent supporters acknowledge it was a Pyrrhic victory. The heavily entrenched French army suffered nine thousand casualties and the Allies twenty-four thousand, losses so high that the well-organized French withdrawal from the field was not even contested.72

71. Murray, ed., Letters and Dispatches, 4: 107, 109; Snyder, ed., Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 2: 1034 #1041; Deane's Journal, 62. The Allies were forced to haul their siege artillery overland since they could not dislodge the French from Ghent.
72. Snyder, ed., Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 3: 1377 #1409; Mémoires militaires, 9: 349–54. Marlborough's belief in battle's decision led him to misjudge wildly the results of Malplaquet, writing immediately after the battle that this "victory" would give them "what peace we please" if the Dutch were reasonable (Snyder, ed., Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 3: 1360 #1392).
returned to the siege of Mons. Neither of these battles eliminated the need for sieges.

The battle-centric interpretation of Marlborough's Flanders campaigns, then, must pin its hopes on 1706. Narratives of the campaign focus on tactical descriptions of Ramillies, and merely assert that pursuit led demoralized garrisons to surrender meekly. To show convincingly that Ramillies directly resulted in the conquest of the Spanish Netherlands, however, requires us to focus our attention on postbattle events; the continuing emphasis only on the decisive battle allows Marlborough's supporters to focus on the details of the battle itself. When we examine the aftermath, the paradox of pursuit in a heavily fortified theater is resolved.

The potential for decisiveness after Ramillies was undoubtedly great. The May 1706 battle opened up the rest of the campaign season (five months) for further advances, prompting Marlborough to write: "The consequence of this battle is likely to be of greater advantage than that of Blenheim, for we have now the whole summer before us." The Allies chased the French army remnants westward for sixty miles, capturing the towns of Leuven (Louvain), Brussels, Mechelen (Malines), Lier, Ghent, Aalst (Alost), Oudenaarde, Damme, Brugge (Bruges), and Antwerp before forcing the enemy field army to disband in the first week of June (see Map 1). The next major action was the siege of Ostend; the trenches were opened on 28 June.

Ramillies might indeed have ended the war. Paris was 140 miles from the Allies' 5 June camp at Aerseele, forty-two days away using Perjes's estimate of one day marching (at ten miles per day) for every three days. Had the Allies marched on Paris, France would have had little

73. The text describing Ramillies takes up six pages in Chandler, Marlborough as Military Commander; the rest of the campaign (over 170 days as compared to the one-day battle) receives only four pages. Jones spends four pages on the battle and two-and-a-half pages on the rest of the campaign (excluding a discussion of Marlborough's negotiations with the Bavarians). See also the case studies of Ramillies in Chandler's "England's Greatest Soldier," 54–55, and "The Great Captain-General," 72–73.

74. Snyder, ed., Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1: 552 #569. Marlborough was so confident of a successful end to the war that he wrote to his wife to prepare the house for his return. Ibid., 559 #575. See also 553 #570, 556 #572; Murray, ed., Letters and Dispatches, 2: 536.

75. Perjes discusses the magazine system which limited armies to thirty days of marching for every one hundred days. From the 1706 Allied correspondence, it appears that the Allies suffered at most a few days of delay waiting for their bread wagons (e.g., Briefwisseling Heinsius, 5: 259 #489, 28 May). Van Nimwegen points out that the Allies were able to continue their advance in part because of the magazines of meal and grain found in the captured Brabant towns. Van Nimwegen, De subsistentie van het leger, 182–84.
time to find a field army to prevent it—a suitable French force was reconstituted only in August. For their part the Dutch agreed to Marlborough’s plan to attack Nieuwpoort and Ostend rather than Namur, their own preference, which eliminates the excuse of obstructing allies. Umbrella wars and coalition conflict, the standard explanations for battle’s failure to end war, cannot explain why a strong, unopposed Allied army did not march straight to Paris and end the war in 1706. The defensibility of fortifications, on the other hand, explains both the paradoxical swift advance and the subsequent return to sieges.

The capture of Spanish Brabant, Spanish Flanders, and a dozen towns has impressed Marlborough’s supporters, but attributing it to Ramillies is only half the answer. Asserting that the battle eliminated the need for sieges, they do not investigate the conditions under which these towns capitulated. Had they been more willing to question their belief in battle’s potential for decision, they might have noted that both Dutch and French sources suggest important qualifications to battle’s ability to capture territory.76 In fact, which towns submitted and which resisted

76. Wijn, ed., Het Staatsche Leger, 2: 65. There is even less excuse for historians to have ignored the comments made by Vault in Mémoires militaires, 6: 47 and 51, since this series is frequently cited.
after Ramillies depended on two critical preconditions: the town’s defensibility (particularly the state of the fortifications and the impact of inundations) and the loyalty of local governors, garrisons, and townspeople. We cannot hold up Ramillies as an example of battle’s ability to eliminate the need for sieges without first considering these factors.

Most of the towns which surrendered to the Allies in the two weeks after Ramillies hardly deserved the designation of “fortress,” in spite of Marlborough’s declaration that “it is very astonishing that the enemy should give up a whole country with so many strong places without the least resistance.”77 The great towns of Spanish Brabant and Flanders in particular had poor fortifications—their weaknesses stemmed as much from lack of maintenance as from outdated fortifications. This was common knowledge even before the war, and French commanders had been complaining about the state of these newly acquired towns from the moment they occupied them in 1701.78 In 1704 Villeroi warned the king that “all of Brabant remains open to the enemies . . . [it] does not have a single fortress which could delay an army for twelve hours without the protection of our army.”79 Conditions had not improved by 1705, as French commanders continued to bemoan the necessity of defending “open” towns with their field army.80 After Ramillies, the commander of

77. Murray, ed., Letters and Dispatches, 2: 553, 554. Lt.-Col. Blackadder exclaimed: “Effects of our victory still more surprising; towns that we thought would have endured a long siege, are giving up and yielding without a stroke.” A. Crichton, ed., The Life and Diary of Lieut.-Col. J. Blackadder . . . (N.p.: H. S. Baynes, 1824), 281.

78. Mémoires militaires, 1: 16, 35, 473; 2: 593, 602–3; Christopher Duffy, The Fortress in the Age of Vauban and Frederick the Great, 1660–1789 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 34–35, also emphasizes the differences between fortresses in the Spanish Netherlands and those in France proper. See the comments of Dutch observers on the poor state of their own frontier fortresses at the beginning of the war, cited in Duffy, Fortress in the Age of Vauban and Frederick the Great, 34; and Briefwisseling Heinsius, 4: 212 #609. The Dutch were still complaining about the “indifferent” state of these same fortresses in 1708, as noted in Veenendaal, “The Opening Phase of Marlborough’s Campaign of 1708 in the Netherlands,” 38.

79. Mémoires militaires, 4: 12, 13: without a French army present, he warned, “the enemies [would be able to] enter Brabant without opposition, run to the gates of Brussels and take whatever towns they wanted in that province, all of them being without defense.” In 1703, the Dutch general Ouwerkerk judged that the Flemish towns of Brugge and Ghent would require an army to protect them. Briefwisseling Heinsius, 2: 267 #686. See also 3: 163 #453.

80. Voir Mémoires militaires, 5: 37, 588, 599, 603, 606. That the towns of Leuven, Lier, Mechelen, and Brussels would fall without the protection of a field army is asserted in 5: 90. The French commander at Leuven reported in 1705 on the shortage of Spanish funds needed to put the town in a state of defense. Service Historique de l’Armée de Terre (SHAT), series A1, vol. 1838, #220, Archives de Guerre (AG), Vincennes, France.
Namur did not expect the Allies to backtrack eastward in order to besiege his fortress, as they would thereby abandon to the French all the Brabant towns they had captured after the battle.\textsuperscript{81} Count Bergeyck, the minister of the Spanish Netherlands, based plans for the next year’s campaign on the assumption that the Allies would be hampered, as the French had been, by the need to protect all these towns.\textsuperscript{82} The French were consistent in their complaints: they had criticized these fortifications long before Ramillies ever took place, and believed that by capturing them, the Allies had placed themselves at a disadvantage.

Once in control of Brabant, the Allies quickly came to appreciate the challenges these towns had presented to the French. Later in the year, Marlborough feared that there were not enough troops to protect the besiegers at Menen and at the same time defend the open towns of Brabant.\textsuperscript{83} In 1707 he complained of the “plague of covering Bruxelles [Brussels] and the rest of the great towns” with his field army.\textsuperscript{84} The Dutch also mentioned the “embarrassment” of covering Brabant’s towns. Lieutenant General Francis Nicholaas Fagel echoed Villeroi’s 1704 judgment: “We don’t have in all of Brabant a single town or place of which we can be assured . . . when our army is far from these places they are in fear.”\textsuperscript{85} As for the coastal towns, Marlborough received reports after Ramillies that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{81} SHAT, series A\textsuperscript{1}, vol. 1936 #248, #251, AG.
\item \textsuperscript{82} Mémoires militaires, 6: 586–87. Bergeyck was particularly critical of the towns of Leuven, Mechelen, and Brussels. Baron Karg de Bebenbourg, chancellor to France’s ally, the Elector of Cologne, added Brugge to the list of towns expected to fall without resistance. Louis Jadin, ed., Correspondance du Baron Karg de Bebenbourg, chancelier du Prince-Evêque de Liège Joseph-Clément de Bavière, Archevêque Electeur de Cologne, avec le Cardinal Paolucci, secrétaire d’état (1700–1719), 2 vols. (Brussels: Institut historique belge de Rome, 1968), 1: 43. After the French had regained Brugge in 1708, they once again acknowledged the need for an army to defend the town against an Allied threat. SHAT, series A\textsuperscript{1}, vol. 2083 #86, AG.
\item \textsuperscript{83} Snyder, ed., Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 2: 608 #617, 642 #648. Marlborough also wanted to evacuate the garrison at Leuven, since it was too far away to be protected by the main field army. Van ‘t Hoff, ed., Marlborough-Heinsius Correspondence, 254 #420. The Dutchmen Heinsius, General Ernst Willem van Salisch, and field deputy Sicco van Goslinga also recognized that the Allies could not afford to garrison all of the great towns of Brabant. Briefwisseling Heinsius, 5: 346 #652, 361 #678, 373 #698, 475 #915.
\item \textsuperscript{84} Snyder, ed., Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 2: 795 #802; also 780 #791. Writing from Brussels in 1708, Marlborough’s trusted subordinate William Cadogan described the town as “being in a manner an open town and subject to the fortune of a battel.” Add MSS 61160 f. 56b; see also Add MSS 61312 f. 182b, Blenheim Papers, British Library.
\item \textsuperscript{85} Briefwisseling Heinsius, 6: 309 #606. See also 299 #590, 312 #612; 7: 91 #195, 250–51 #519; 12: 244 #407. Dutch observers also complained about the Flemish towns of Brugge and Ghent. Ibid., 4: 238 #672.
\end{itemize}
they had been "much neglected of late, and scarce any of them in good condition." Such evidence from before and after 1706, and from both French and Allied authors, shows that it is a gross misrepresentation to present such towns as "major fortresses," evoking as they do images of Vauban's pré carré.87

Even towns which English contemporaries specifically mentioned as defensible must be examined more closely. Since Marlborough judged Oudenaarde "a very strong place," he was quite pleased with reports of its peaceful surrender.88 The French commander on the scene, however, had learned the true state of affairs upon his arrival: the upkeep of the fortifications had been completely abandoned, the outworks had neither palisades nor a glacis, while goods were being smuggled into the town through several breaches in the curtain wall. To make things worse, the two French battalions in garrison totaled only two hundred men, there was not enough money to pay for the necessary repairs, and inundating the area would have required a week while an Allied detachment was only a few miles away.89

Weakly fortified towns surrendered after Ramillies, but when the Allies encountered defensible towns, garrisons refused to surrender. The two French battalions in Dendermonde (Termonde) declined to surrender when first summoned in early June, having flooded the town's environs to prevent the Allies from seizing it.90 The Allies postponed besieging the town and blockaded it instead—a delay would have allowed the French additional time to rebuild their shattered army and morale. The garrison held out until a September siege eventually forced it to surrender. With adequate defenses, taking a fortress could require a siege even after a battle as successful as Ramillies.

87. Vauban's fortifications extended only as far north as Oudenaarde, Menen, Ath, and the coastal towns of Flanders. See the map in Bernard Pujo, Vauban (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991), 88–89. Even the fortifications of those towns in the Spanish Netherlands that did withstand a siege were much weaker than the fortresses in France proper, as can be seen by a comparison of the length of time they were besieged and the besieger's casualties.
88. Snyder, ed., Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1: 558 #574. Marlborough was possibly misled by his recollection of the town's successful defense against William III and sixty thousand men—he placed the siege in the Nine Years' War, but the town had actually been besieged in 1674. Ibid., 1: 559 #575. Observers in London had expected Oudenaarde to require a several-week siege. Briefweisseling Heinsius, 5: 298 #550. See also 5: 277 #517; Het Staatsche Leger, 2: 62–63.
89. SHAT, series A1, vol. 1936 #256 (30 May), #264 (31 May), AG.
90. Ibid., vol. 1937 #30, AG.
Worse off than Dendermonde, most Spanish Netherlands towns had let their fortifications disintegrate to such an extent that their only defense lay in a covering field army. Ramillies's destruction of the French field army was the catalyst for territorial conquest, albeit not the only possible catalyst, as maneuvering the French army out of its covering position could have achieved the same goal. How the various garrisons reacted to this event was determined largely by the defenses of the threatened towns.

Historians who stress Ramillies's role in the campaign also fail to acknowledge pre-existing political factors that facilitated conquest. The sympathies of urban authorities and townspeople, as well as the Spanish governor and garrison troops, could also influence a French garrison's decision to evacuate or fight. Contrary to popular opinion, townspeople did not always meekly surrender to whichever army was nearest. The towns of Brabant and Flanders had proven their willingness to act independently, with their long tradition of revolt against centralizing princes, and the War of the Spanish Succession would provide yet more examples.91 The Allies appealed to this tradition by guaranteeing the States of Brabant and its towns their traditional rights and privileges in return for accepting the suzerainty of Charles III. The French were thereby forced to garrison all of the large towns if they wanted to keep them.92

Apart from the desire to protect their towns from the ravages of war, many Spanish Netherlanders were genuinely eager to accept Allied rule. Veenendaal has already discussed the widespread discontent with the French that led to a political "revolution" in Spanish Brabant, comparable in many respects to England's "Glorious Revolution" of 1688.93 The disloyalty of Brussels, for example, was evident to Villeroi even before


92. Murray, ed., Letters and Dispatches, 1: 529, 534–35; Snyder, ed., Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1: 574 #588; Briefwisseling Heinsius, 5: 276 #517. The proclamation sent to Ghent is printed in Hubert van Houte, Les Occupations étrangères en Belgique sous l'Ancien Régime, 2 vols. (Ghent: Van Ryselberghe & Rombaut, 1930), 2: 223; also SHAT, series A1, vol. 1937 #10, AG; an appeal to Brussels can be found in 9188 #4, Archief van de Staten-Generaal (SG), Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague. Goslinga thought that "no better means [than this] can be imagined" to facilitate the reduction of these towns. Briefwisseling Heinsius, 5: 276 #517.

93. Veenendaal, "Kan men spreken." G. M. Trevelyan also discussed this political variable which "softened the character and speeded the pace of Marlborough's conquest" (123) in England under Queen Anne: Ramillies and the Union with Scotland (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1948), 123–25. The magistrates of Kortrijk (Courtrai) took the initiative, offering to accept Allied rule in order to avoid paying taxes to the French. Add MSS 61160 ff. 21–22, Blenheim Papers, British Library.
Ramillies, while afterward he reported that there was a general revolt of the people in Brabant against the French.\textsuperscript{94} The hostility of the Oudenaarde townspeople would have made any defense difficult, regardless of its fortifications. The Spanish governor refused to disarm the inhabitants and posted a militia guard in the town hall.\textsuperscript{95} Despite these weaknesses, the French commander surrendered only after seven Allied battalions and four cannon appeared before the town.\textsuperscript{96}

Even towns with fortifications strong enough to require a siege might be compromised by treachery. The second town Marlborough expected to have to besiege was Antwerp. The Allies had already started preparations for a siege,\textsuperscript{97} but this soon became unnecessary. The six French battalions in town were ordered to defend the citadel to the last extremity, but the Spanish troops occupying the citadel refused them entry, while the magistrates would not meet their supply demands.\textsuperscript{98} Negotiating Antwerp's surrender, Earl William Cadogan corroborated the French complaints about the Spanish governor: "the easy getting of this place is entirely owing to him."\textsuperscript{99} Fearing a month-long siege, Marlborough allowed the French units to evacuate to Quesnoy rather than demand they surrender as prisoners.\textsuperscript{100} Antwerp was the only fortress to surrender after Ramillies that could have reasonably been expected to defend
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itself. Even here, it required the combined pressures of an approaching Allied army, disloyal Spanish troops controlling the citadel (the key variable), a hostile populace, and generous capitulation terms to produce its peaceful surrender. The French would not make the same mistake in the future, moving to disarm their remaining towns' inhabitants and ensuring that French rather than Spanish troops held key posts. If the French had taken these measures earlier, pursuit would have ended at Antwerp rather than Ostend.

Urban populations continued their active role even after conquest, as is illustrated by the complications stemming from urban factionalism. After the French army retreated from Ghent, the Spanish troops in the castle declared for Charles III. The Allies took the precaution of replacing pro-French magistrates with their own candidates, but this did not eliminate lingering loyalty to the Elector of Bavaria. Within a year Dutch observers were warning that its populace was now hostile to the Allied cause. Four months later a pro-French faction turned the city over to the French, compelling the three hundred English soldiers in the castle (the only garrison) to surrender. The towns of Brugge and Aalst also opened their gates to French detachments. A brief Allied siege won back Ghent at the close of the 1708 campaign, with support from their own allies within the town. But the Allied hold on the town remained tenuous, as the next year a magistrate there warned that "the numerous garrison that we have is the only guarantee" that another French attack would not succeed again. Unable to spare large garrisons for every

101. SHAT, series A I, vol. 1937 #38, #93, and vol. 1943 #481, AG; Mémoires militaires, 6: 57-58, 498, 503.

102. Briefwisseling Heinsius, 6: 341 #666. For examples of Dutch concerns about Ghent's loyalty, see ibid., 6: 299 #590, 301 #592; and Veenendaal, "The Opening Phase," 37.

103. Veenendaal, "The Opening Phase," 39-41. The French narrowly avoided a similar setback in 1706 at Mons, a relatively strong fortress, where only the timely arrival of French troops prevented a town delegation from going to greet the Allies, despite there being no immediate threat to the town. Mémoires militaires, 6: 503, 17 June.

104. For evidence of the pro-Alliance inclinations in Ghent, see Kervyn de Vokaersbeke, "La capitulation de Gand de 1709," Messenger des sciences historiques, ou, Archives des arts et de la bibliographie de Belgique (1875), 444-46.

105. Van Houtte, Les Occupations étrangères en Belgique sous l'ancien régime, 2: 383-84; also 385-87. After Ghent's capture in 1708, the French worked to repair the fortifications that had been "extremely neglected" for the past thirty years (Mémoires militaires, 8: 530-31). French intendant Claude Le Blanc described the city as "an open village with a trench around it," cited in Claude Sturgill, Claude Le Blanc: Civil Servant of the King (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1975), 25.

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walled town, both the French and the Allies relied on the good will of local authorities for security behind the front lines.\textsuperscript{106}

An actively hostile citizenry was less threatening if French garrisons could rely on their Spanish governor’s support. Dendermonde’s inhabitants threatened to revolt against the small garrison, but the Spanish governor remained faithful to the French. Refusing Allied demands to surrender the town, he bought the French enough time to receive reinforcements and neutralize the internal threat, allowing them to withstand a bombardment and blockade before finally being taken by siege.\textsuperscript{107}

Where strong fortifications could not be relied upon (through disrepair or treachery), the inhabitants’ sympathies played a critical role in a garrison’s decision to defend or flee.\textsuperscript{108} Troops could be as demoralized by the prospect of defending decrepit fortifications while faced with threatening mobs of armed citizens as by the fear of a victorious approaching army. In most cases, the small French garrisons were ordered to join the dwindling field army whose retreat had left them exposed. Without decaying Spanish fortifications and the Allies’ opportunistic exploitation of anti-French sentiment, conquest after Ramillies could not have advanced nearly as far as it did.

Narratives of the 1706 campaign usually add the four towns of Ostend, Menen, Dendermonde, and Ath to their list of conquests. Occasionally they mention that these fortresses were captured by siege, but always imply that their capture was the inevitable outcome of Ramillies itself. Such descriptions conflate two distinct phases of the campaign: the thirteen days of unfettered pursuit made possible by weak fortifications and sympathetic populations, and the abrupt return to sieges when confronted by fortresses that refused to submit.

\textsuperscript{106} Most of the captured towns were garrisoned by local Spanish troops that had deserted the French cause. Van ‘t Hoff, ed., Marlborough-Heinsius Correspondence, 234 #391; Briefweisseling Heinsius, 5: 259 #489, 275 #515.

\textsuperscript{107} For events at Dendermonde, see SHAT, series A\textsuperscript{1}, vol. 1937 #30, #40, #149, #166, #262, AG.

\textsuperscript{108} The failed French siege of Brussels in 1708 is also instructive. The Elector of Bavaria hoped to capture the town after receiving vague assurances that his presence would inspire the townspeople to open the gates. When the promised fifth column never materialized, he decided to conduct a (ultimately unsuccessful) siege, despite being unprepared for a formal attack. For the French perspective, see SHAT, series A\textsuperscript{1}, vol. 2084 #76, #79, #129, #136, #154, #155, #158, AG. For an Allied account of the siege, see Le triomphe de l’auguste alliance et la levée du siège de Brusselle par l’armée de France sous les ordres de Son Altesse Electorale de Bavière au mois de novembre 1708 (Nancy: Chez Dominique Gaidon, 1709).
The Allies entered the second phase of the campaign on 6 June, signaled by a return to sieges. They had chased the French army from one weakly fortified position to another (Leuven, Ghent, and Brussels), but the French had finally reached their old lines, dispersing their remaining units into their strong towns (see Map 2). As the Duke was forced to concede, he was now “surrounded by garrisons and enemy strong places.” He had achieved his goal of eliminating the enemy field army but had to admit that “we have nothing to do but take by force the towns they have left us.” Dendermonde had been a harbinger of things

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Map 2: 1706 Flanders conquests during the pursuit phase.

109. Wijn, ed., Het Staatsche Leger, 2: 64. Ivor Burton was one of the rare British historians who, while spending only two pages on the aftermath of Ramillies as compared to six on the battle, at least acknowledged the transition from a first phase of conquest to the “slower and less dramatic” second phase. Burton, Captain-General, 106.

110. Mémoires militaires, 6: 54–55; Jadin, ed., Correspondance du Baron Karg de Bebenbourg, 44; van ‘t Hoff, ed., Marlborough-Heinsius Correspondence, 236 #393; Snyder, ed., Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1: 555 #571, 565 #578, 566 #579; Briefwisseling Heinsius, 5: 269 #503.


112. Van ‘t Hoff, ed., Marlborough-Heinsius Correspondence, 236 #393, 5 June. Also Murray, ed., Letters and Dispatches, 3: 107, 109, 112; Snyder, ed., Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1: 565 #578.
to come. French garrisons in defensible towns refused to surrender when summoned. Nieuwpoort could not be besieged because of its inundations, so the Allies turned instead to Ostend. Marlborough had hoped that the Spanish governor would accept his capitulation offer, but was disappointed. Another disappointment came when the burghers’ threats to take up arms against the garrison failed to intimidate the governor into surrendering. Instead, the Allies had to take the town by siege.

The rest of the campaign remained open for further action, but Ramillies could help the Allies no longer. The Allied army now had to wait for its siege train to catch up. After two weeks of energetic pursuit, Marlborough spent a week at the Hague discussing a descent on the French coast; there was little else to do since, as he explained, “we can advance no farther til we have our canon.” Four fortresses were besieged, consuming 109 days and all of the Allies’ siege supplies. Of 176 days in the campaign, battle and pursuit lasted two weeks. Of the remaining twenty-three weeks (161 days), all but three were spent either in a siege or waiting for the supplies to start one. Where exposed fortifications were weak, townspeople hostile, and military allies disloyal, French garrisons retreated. Garrisons in stronger towns like Dendermonde, Nieuwpoort, and Ostend refused to surrender and resisted against all odds, even without the prospect of relief from outside and even with hostile citizens inside. Marlborough’s impasse was not due to the logistical demands of an advancing field army, nor due to the obstruction of his allies, nor due to manpower shortages resulting from the need to garrison the Allies’ new conquests. He lost his momentum as he moved from an area of indefensible fortifications to a region of defensible ones.

113. Snyder, ed., Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1: 573 #587, 580 #593; Add MSS 61309 ff. 139–40, Blenheim Papers, British Library; RvS 663-II #178, and SG 9188 #69, #83, Algemeen Rijksarchief.

114. Snyder, ed., Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1: 560 #576.


116. Snyder, ed., Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1: 566 #579. The Allies’ need for siege cannon first surfaced when they expected to besiege Antwerp, Marlborough writing that “we have nothing now that stopes us but the want of canon.” Ibid., 554–55 #571; also 557–58 #574, 565 #578; van ’t Hoff, ed., Marlborough-Heinsius Correspondence, 236 #393; Deane’s Journal, 39; RvS 663-I #70, and SG 9188 #48, #57, Algemeen Rijksarchief; Briefwisseling Heinsius, 5: 281 #522, 296 #542.

117. Allied losses at Ramillies (only thirty-six hundred according to Chandler) were quickly replaced by Spanish, Bavarian, and Walloon [French-speaking Belgian] troops that deserted to the Allies, as well as by Dutch troops drawn from rear garrisons. Dutch field deputy Ferdinand van Collen judged that the Allied army had actually increased in size since the battle. Briefwisseling Heinsius, 5: 280 #522, 3 June.
Conclusion

The English-speaking world's understanding of the War of the Spanish Succession has progressed little since the days of Winston Churchill. Minor changes have been made to the campaign narratives, but the underlying assumptions persist: the same partisan biographical format, the same narrow reliance on British sources, the same faith in battle's potential for decisiveness. Confronted with the reality of Marlborough's dismissal at the end of 1711, supporters must fall back on a litany of excuses in order to maintain their belief that battle could have won the war. The laudatory literature forgets, however, that both sides had to willingly accept battle for it to occur, that Dutch contributions to the war effort far outweigh the minor squabbles they engaged in over military strategy, and that even when Marlborough fought his battles, the results were usually indecisive.

The campaign of 1706 may have been Marlborough's most successful, but it also reinforced the limitations which even a general of his caliber could not overcome. The early battle led to the temporary elimination of the French field army. But the only towns that surrendered were those whose fortifications were in a state of disrepair or whose inhabitants actively opposed French rule. Mirroring the 1704 campaign in Germany and the 1707 campaign in Spain, the 1706 Allied advance in Flanders after a successful battle stalled when they encountered adequately prepared fortresses which refused to submit. Ramillies did not eliminate the need for sieges in areas where sieges could otherwise be expected, and Marlborough was forced to embrace the strategy his supporters so detest. A reexamination of Marlborough's campaigns reaffirms that the desire for battle and pursuit was not enough; battle could be decisive only in theaters which met the prerequisites of a willing opponent and indefensible towns. Placing Marlborough's battles back into their operational context highlights the significant limitations a battle-seeking strategy faced in early modern Europe.

118. After the successful battle of Almansa in 1707, the Duke of Berwick's advance quickly stalled in Catalonia, while two lengthy sieges were required to recover Valencia.