

British Journal for Military History

Volume 9, Issue 3, November 2023

Review of *The Business of Armaments: Armstrongs, Vickers and the International Arms Trade, 1855–1955* by Joanna Spear

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ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 29 November 2023

Citation: Christopher Phillips, 'Review of *The Business of Armaments: Armstrongs, Vickers and the International Arms Trade, 1855–1955* by Joanna Spear', *British Journal for Military History*, 9.3 (2023), pp. 142-144.

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palace to commemorate his father's defeat of East India Company forces at Pollilur, 'which the British subsequently characterised as grotesque and lacking in perspective compared to their own artistic celebrations of victory' (p. 39). Despite pointing out the clear irony here, Beckett does not go on to unpick the issues of perception and the imperial gaze at work in this comparison, nor justify why these murals – depicting battles in which British forces took part – are not considered at more length in the book. Perhaps, although it might have required a deliberately flexible definition of panorama, further similar examples could have been included in the book to great effect.

Another area which could be developed in future studies building on Beckett's work is the obvious class and gendered dimensions of popular reactions to the panoramas. The book is full of art critics' withering comments aimed at the 'middling sort', or the 'female of sensibility', or quotes that attest that 'more than one female was carried out swooning' from a supposedly particularly powerful scene (p. 41), which would be interesting to examine further. For the student of the classic and modern military panorama, however, this could be a helpful starting point – and for the traveller, a handy list of surviving panoramas around the world is included in the appendices.

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DOI: [10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v9i3.1744](https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v9i3.1744)

Joanna Spear, *The Business of Armaments: Armstrongs, Vickers and the International Arms Trade, 1855–1955*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 388pp. ISBN: 978-1009297523 (hardback). Price £95.

At the heart of this engaging study lie two central questions: how did Britain's most prominent arms manufacturers, Armstrongs and Vickers – amalgamated in 1927 as Vickers-Armstrongs – establish their businesses in the nineteenth century; and what kind of relationships did they foster and maintain both with the British government and with foreign states over the course of a hundred tumultuous years between 1855 and 1955? To address these questions, Joanna Spear draws upon the firms' archival records, regional archives, government documents, and newspaper coverage to examine the companies' business strategies and assess the extent to which those strategies exhibited signs of independence from – and influence over – the policies of

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successive British governments. Her conclusion, that the arc of the relationship between the armament firms and the British state had evolved by 1955 from 'independence to interdependence' (p. 4) is convincingly argued throughout the book's pages.

The book is divided into two parts. The first, slightly longer section, provides a broadly chronological account of Armstrongs and Vickers attempts to sell arms in Britain from the mid-nineteenth century to the period following the end of the Second World War. Here, Spear provides readers with a firms'-eye view of the rapid progress in weapons technology that characterised the latter part of the century without slipping into unnecessary technical jargon. The book highlights the intense lobbying efforts both firms engaged in to try and bolster their position in their domestic market – and their attempts to exclude other firms from entering that market – and documents how periods of prolonged and intensive warfare presented both opportunities and crises for the firms. In 1899, for example, the outbreak of the South African War brought with it a huge increase in demand for the wares produced by Armstrongs and Vickers. However, both companies were unable to rapidly scale-up production to meet the voracious appetites of the British armed forces.

Unsurprisingly, the two world wars provided the catalysts for major changes in the relationship between arms manufacturers and the government. However, arguably the more interesting aspect of this half of the book revolves around the different approaches the two firms took in pursuit of success. Across each of the five chapters in this section, Spear deals with seven identified 'strategies' employed by the firms to both cultivate their relationships with the state and to insulate themselves from the worst effects of declining order books (notably in the aftermath of Britain's wars). Of particular interest to this reviewer were Spear's account in Chapter three of the manner in which fierce competition between the firms at the turn of the twentieth century gave way to cooperation and collusion, and of the following chapter's coverage of the 'dangerous position' (p. 126) inhabited by the firms after 1918. The collapse in demand for munitions and weapons of war was followed by a period of negotiations designed to control international arms sales, the Great Depression, and – as the 1930s slipped into view – a reluctance on the part of the British Government to seriously countenance the implications of further advances in weapons technology upon national security.

The final chapter in this section documents the difficulties with which Vickers-Armstrongs grappled during the period leading up to the Second World War. Spears records an almost complete absence of dialogue between the government and industry with regards to the anticipated requirements to be made on the latter in the event of war with Nazi Germany – a particularly surprising state of affairs given the number of characters within the book's pages who jumped from public service to employment

with the firms during the period. General Sir Noel Birch, who vacated the post of Master General of the Ordnance in 1927 before immediately joining the Board of Vickers-Armstrongs, is just one of a plethora of former army and navy officers to take prominent roles in the firms throughout the period covered in the text. This reviewer would have liked Spear to provide some more interrogation of the seeming 'revolving door' between the armed forces and the arms industry. Tantalising glimpses of the values such men possessed are to be had, but more could have been made as to the technical, organisational, or 'softer' skills former service personnel like Birch contributed to the firms' operations.

The second section of the book takes the form of three case studies into the firms' activities in three foreign markets: Latin America, Asia, and the Ottoman Empire/Turkey. Against a backdrop of military coups, civil and interstate wars, and unpredictable economic environments – and for the most part with very little help from the British Government – Armstrongs and Vickers established remarkably enduring relations in all three regions. Given the scope of the three chapters in this section, it is perhaps understandable that the writing here lacks the precision and focus of the section on the domestic market. The narrative displays a tendency towards documenting various tenders and negotiations and the activities of key individuals. Consequently, the seven strategies outlined previously become largely eclipsed by minutiae and detail that was absent from the earlier section. The text is still rich in material – not least on the firms' attempts to navigate the declining relationship between Britain and the Ottoman Empire prior to the First World War – but the relative absence of structure across these three chapters means that readers seeking to extract information on particular themes are advised to take careful notes to assist them in retracing their steps.

That relatively minor issue aside, this is an intriguing and important contribution to the history of the arms industry, and one that sheds new light on the complexity of the relationships between the 'merchants of death' and their most prominent customers.

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DOI: [10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v9i3.1745](https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v9i3.1745)