In the early part of the sixteenth century, print culture in England was dominated by the publication of religious texts. In 1588, however, after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, England saw a proliferation of both religious and secular print. Some of the secular pamphlets were war-oriented ballads and some newsbooks. This explosion of interest in contemporary war-oriented ballads and news pamphlets is often disregarded due to the scholarly belief that such publications constituted a genre that was culturally negligible. Nevertheless, I argue that if topical war ballads and news pamphlets are investigated in the context of Elizabethan military culture they can be seen as voicing a genuine ‘Elizabethan’ war experience.

This article aims to locate the status of war-oriented ballads and news pamphlets as a means of determining the importance of cheap print to Elizabethan military culture. The first section surveys the critical assessments of Elizabethan cheap print as it attempts to locate a general understanding of the significance of news and military pamphlets within existing scholarly discourses. The second section offers a case study of the careers of John Wolfe and Richard Field, two of the most prolific stationers of the age, as it assesses their publishing practices for circulating political and military discourses. These sections coalesce in a reading of military culture that relates its ideological concerns both to an Elizabethan public and to circles of courtly and aristocratic readers.

A. A General Overview of Cheap Print and Public Opinion
As Natalie Mears notes, in the sixteenth century there was no evidence that contemporary readers saw print as a formal vehicle of news.¹ Both Fritz Levy and Richard Cust have observed that printed news pamphlets were not produced in large numbers until the outbreak of war against Spain in 1585² and that printed news did not contribute to the establishment of a public sphere in Elizabethan England prior to that date.³ This opinion, however, has been disputed. For instance, Joad Raymond has identified the significant rise in the publication of news pamphlets as not occurring in the 1580s, but in the 1620s.⁴ Nevertheless, as Lisa F. Parmelee observes, and as I wish to support, many Elizabethan news pamphlets of the 1580s and the 1590s resemble the political propaganda on the French Wars of Religion.⁵ Moreover, the circulation of news pamphlets and ballads that John Wolfe or Richard Field printed, as I will further elaborate, can claim significance in moulding popular opinion.
It is noteworthy that, contrary to the opinions of both Levy and Cust, in the sixteenth century the circulation of news was neither restricted to the London area nor to an elite readership. Examining records from the Star Chamber cases, for example, which include murders, witchcraft trials, accounts of monstrous births, and reports of Elizabeth’s illegitimate pregnancies or children, Adam Fox demonstrates that news – whether of domestic or foreign political events – was neither geographically nor socially limited. Moreover, as Natasha Würzbach asserts in *The Rise of the English Street Ballad*, “within the whole spectrum of the forerunners and early forms of English journalism, the street ballad has its fairly fixed position and is characterised by set functions.” Therefore, I suggest that the late sixteenth-century ballads and news pamphlets acted significantly as an early form of journalism, similar to those of the 1620s. M. A. Shaaber also notes that war news is a forerunner of the newspaper in sixteenth-century England. If the sixteenth-century ballads and news pamphlets, as Tessa Watt speculates, served as news media to the contemporary readers who “would, no doubt, have picked up the news pamphlets as we do a paper,” war news would have been popular and affected public attitudes toward military conflicts in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is thus hardly surprising to see that, on the one hand, government regulations tried to strictly control printed pamphlets, broadside ballads of topical reporting and political comment, and, on the other hand, the government supported propagandistic broadside print.

Since printed news pamphlets and ballads of the 1620s and 1630s were commonly circulated, they engaged with, as well as acted as, a vehicle for popular opinions. In the 1580s and 90s England was militarily engaged in the Protestant cause in several ways; but by the 1620s the same militaristic Protestantism was frustrated that England wasn’t so engaged. Those who were in the 1580s/90s supporting national military action were by the 1620s opposing a government policy, which was not willing to engage in war. So the support of militant Protestantism had shifted politically from being – from the monarch’s perspective to that of the 1620s and 1630s (when England, responding to the Thirty Years’ War and Charles I’s controversial religious policy, faced increasing tension between Protestant and Catholic sides), the role of news pamphlets and ballads would have been similar. Just as people of the 1620s and 1630s were probably conditioned by and likely responded to either print or oral news, so were people of the 1580s and 1590s. In this sense, George Chapman’s translation draws on a collected political and military popular memory. The dedication of Chapman’s translation of seven books of the *Iliades* to the Earl of Essex, whom he saw as a man of “living instance of the Achileian vertues,” for example, stretches from 1598 to 1609, when he dedicated the *Twelue Bookes of the Iliades* to Prince Henry. Not only did Chapman dedicate the complete *Iliades* to the prince in 1611, but in 1616 he also dedicated the second version of the book of Homer to Prince Henry, the late prince, remembering him as a man who “loved the Theorik of [military] things, to practise the same” and was excellent “in all manner of Things
belonging to the Wars.” Similarly, early seventeenth-century history plays, such as Thomas Dekker’s *The Whore of Babylon* and the second part of Thomas Heywood’s *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody* about Elizabeth and her reign, illustrate a growing interest in militarism. It is not surprising, therefore, that when political conditions in the early seventeenth century evoked Elizabeth’s memory and military legacy both drama and cheap print used the same military image and language to engage a popular audience.

B. Pamphlets and the Circulation of Military News

As Shaaber observes, “[of] all the news from France printed before 1600, half, roughly speaking, was published by four men—John Wolfe (who published more than 60% of the half), Edward Aggas, William Wright, and Richard Field.” At first glance, the publications of these individuals seem to consist mainly of reproductions of material printed or translated from private letters or from letters already printed in France and in the Low Countries. This kind of publishing has therefore been regarded critically as offering only a limited means for understanding Elizabethan politics. Such an approach, however, should be reconsidered because pamphlets of this period, as Clifford C. Huffman suggests, substantially “helped to popularise and confirm the highly charged partisan political atmosphere of the 1580s and early 1590s.” Furthermore, I suggest that the kind of books entered in the Stationers’ Register, especially pamphlets, reflect the interest taken by the English public in the military campaign of France and the Low Countries. Also, Thomas Nashe in his *Pierce Peniless* (1592) observed an Elizabethan news reader’s “greedy” purchase of newsbooks and D. C. Collins’s list of contemporary news pamphlets confirms readers’ prevailing interest in current affairs. These critical understandings suggest that news pamphlets and military ballads need to be discussed not only in terms of their circulation of war news, but also in terms of their functioning as vehicles for popularising military narratives for a non-specialised, public readership.

Despite their performative and musical nature, ballads are characterised by their didactic function. While ballads were seen as offering entertainment, they were also inherently a means for circulating current news and general instruction, especially to groups of individuals at markets, street corners, public houses, and fairs. Although some contemporary ballads, referred to by modern critics as ‘news ballads’ or ‘journalistic ballads,’ have been compared with the current embodiment of ‘newspapers,’ our understanding of Elizabethan ballads does not seem to consider the medium’s role as ‘news’ seriously. Of course, by comparing Elizabethan ballads like *A New Ballet of the Strange and Most Cruell Whippes Which the Spanyards Had Prepared to Whippe and Torment English Men and Women* with twentieth-century newspapers, our understanding of the significance of ballads seems speculative rather than accurate.

Pamphlets were vernacular works of topical appeal, which engaged with social, political and ecclesiastical issues and were generally published in the quarto format. To contemporaries’ eyes, early pamphlets, like ballads, had been associated with ephemeral,
untrustworthy, and poorly printed books. By the 1580s, however, pamphlets sometimes functioned as newsbooks, offering general commentary on political, religious, and social issues. Through the evolution of the print marketplace, both pamphleteers and their readers began to see the possibilities for the expansion of the medium; ballads became a regular feature of booksellers’ stalls and an increasingly important element in the economy of the book trade. John Wolfe’s name appears as printer on the majority of title pages of both news pamphlets and military ballads. Considering that Wolfe’s fellow printers and booksellers recorded and advertised their role in printing and selecting (or modifying) a title, explicitly detailing the names of those publishing, printing, and retailing, his dominating role in the industry of war news pamphlet and ballads suggests that he was successful not only in profiting by printing but also in disseminating his reputation as a reliable news provider. It is true that such practices had originated in response to the government’s 1542 proclamation requiring any English book, ballad or play to display the name of the printer, author, and date of publication. However, as James Raven argues, from the early seventeenth-century the title-page began to be used to “guide potential customers more precisely to the originating shop.” Therefore, ample room is left to reconsider the significance of the appearance of Wolfe’s name on popular political and military-oriented publications in this respect. Such an approach will hopefully lead us to understand how certain Elizabethan printers or publishers, especially Wolfe’s business successor, Field, acted cooperatively within military circles and how this cooperation cultivated the spread of militaristic discourses within, as well as without, aristocratic and courtly communities.

The long war with Spain in the late sixteenth century meant that military pamphlets remained popular in booksellers’ stocks throughout the 1580s and 1590s. Therefore, one might suggest that while almost every stationer produced military-oriented books of all types, printing military material was one of the most distinctive features of Elizabethan print culture. Wolfe printed Spanish military books such as Francisco de Valdes’s The Serjeant Maior (1590) and Sancho de Londono’s Military Discipline (1590), French military treatises including Bertrand de Loque’s Discoveries of Warre and Single Combat (1591), and Vincentio Saviolo’s renowned study of Italian fencing, His Practise (1595). Field also printed books that discussed present-day soldiering, including Leonardo and Thomas Digges’s An Arithmetical Warlike Treatise (1590), Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso (1591) – which, according to Sidney, “never displease[s] a sooldier” – and Plutarch’s The lives of the noble Greiackes and Romanes (1595) which retold the story of the famous “warlike princes” of antiquity.

However, Wolfe and Field differ from other stationers whose military publications were entirely motivated by profit. Of course, Wolfe’s and Field’s financial aims cannot be disputed. But given that those military subject books they printed formed an important element of Elizabethan military and social life, we need to think to what extent their connections with military circles influenced their printing business.
anecdotal accounts of Wolfe make a convincing case for his social and political connections with leading Elizabethan militarists. In 1582, when a group of stationers led by Wolfe petitioned the Queen over the dispersal of privileges, Wolfe was imprisoned but soon released following the intervention of Thomas North, a soldier and a translator of Plutarch. Furthermore, from the 1580s, Wolfe became acquainted with Gabriel Harvey, and, by 1592, Harvey was employed at Wolfe’s London printing house as a reader of proofs and general advisor. As Parmelee has pointed out, Harvey, in his friendship with Wolfe, advised Wolfe about publishing new works. In turn, Wolfe presented copies to Harvey, including English translations of French political treatise and anti-league pamphlets. Harvey inscribed his own copy of Michel Hurault’s *An Excellent Discourse upon the Now Present Estate of France* (1592) with the annotation that the book was given to “mee bie M’Woolfe, for a special rare Discourse.” Moreover, Harvey often emphasized that military officers or students of war needed “to devote themselves to sum valiant especial noblemen, or singular captain of most famous vertu.” Such aristocratic benefactors as Leicester, Sidney or Essex were the obvious choice for such devotion in the 1580s and the 1590s; they endeavored, as one writer has claimed, to make themselves the “great patron of the warrs.” Given that by the 1580s Harvey had entered the patronage of both Leicester and Sidney, and that Wolfe had published Harvey’s correspondence with Edmund Spenser, we can deduce that Wolfe became associated with military circles through his friendship and that he published for pleasure as well as for profit. It is also useful to observe that beyond Wolfe’s association with the war party his interest in the French wars was possibly fed by his contacts abroad. He was active in the continental book trade, travelled to the Frankfurt book fairs, and no doubt had many correspondents abroad.

The role played by Harvey as a “facilitator” amongst courtly circles has constituted the focus of academic study. It is therefore reasonable to assume that when Harvey read “Machiavell in Italian” he was following from the classical learning Sidney recommended and could feasibly have made specific references to Machiavelli’s *I Discorsi* (1584) and *I Sette Libri Dell’Arte Della Guerra* (1587). Given that both of the two Italian editions of Machiavelli’s works, along with several French political pamphlets, were printed by Wolfe, it is probable that Wolfe could have played an important role in providing the circle with appropriate reading material. Since the philosophy of war has a central place in Machiavelli’s world-view, it is therefore reasonable to suggest that Wolfe not only furnished contemporary readers with access to a secular perspective on history but he also helped introduce political and military ideologies into aristocratic and courtly circles.

To further explore Wolfe’s potential role as a transmitter of political and militaristic texts within Elizabethan circles, it is useful to note the case of Wolfe’s friendship with John Hayward whose book was used to prove Essex’s treacherous intention in the rebellion. In 1599, when Hayward dedicated the *First Part of the Life and Reigne of King*
Henrie IV to the Earl of Essex (whom Hayward saw as a “natural patron to such a book”), Wolfe appeared as the most natural printer to select for the job. When Robert Cecil reportedly saw the Chamberlain’s Men’s production of Richard II on the eve of Essex’s rebellion, he probably also believed that Essex was responsible for the endorsement of Hayward’s book, which to him made “this time seem like that of Richard II, to be reframed by him as Henry IV.” Furthermore, Cecil stated that Essex “kept this book fourteen days to peruse and knew many copies were dispersed, sent to the Metropolitan to have it called in as a dangerous book.” However, what should be gleaned from the parallel between Hayward’s Henry IV and Shakespeare’s Richard II is that Hayward’s history would have been more discreetly intended to act as a vehicle for the kind of political propaganda understood by educated readers. According to Wolfe, about five or six hundred copies of Hayward’s Henry IV were quickly sold before the book was banned. Therefore, it is tempting to say that just as Shakespeare’s tragedy, which “played 40 times in open streets and houses,” might have provoked pro-Essexian opinions with crowds, the publication of Hayward’s Henry IV might have worked similarly for a readership.

It is also clear that Field collaborated with Wolfe in operating secret presses and then gradually took over from Wolfe in the practice of surreptitious publication. While it is acknowledged that Field was the printer of Shakespeare’s first two published works, Venus and Adonis (1593) and The Rape of Lucrece (1594), the extent of his connection with the Elizabethan military circle remains open to further examination. Similarly, while we know that Field was acquainted with Burghley—he dedicated Puttenham’s Arte of English Poesie (1589) to him—we should also observe that Field printed Antonio Perez’s Pedaços de Historia (1594) as dedicated to the Earl of Essex. As for Perez’s Pedaços de Historia, Denis B. Woodfield suggests that by the publication of this material, Essex would have been intending to inflame the population of Aragon by revealing the wrongs done to them by Philip II and to the book’s author. Perez, the former secretary to the king of Spain and current fugitive from Spanish government, received financial support from Essex during his stay in England for eighteen months. Given the probability of Essex’s personal friendship with Perez, and his occasional consultation with him with regard to Spanish affairs, there is every reason to think Essex would have been concerned with the publication of Perez’s book for the same reason.

Sir Robert Dallington, who directed his Hypnerotomachia (1592) to the memory of Sir Philip Sidney to the Earl of Essex, dedicated another book, a book called Aphorismes Ciuill and Militarie (printed by Field in 1613) to Prince Charles in the hope that the prince would become a “true inheritor of [his brother’s] vertues [sic].” Furthermore, Sir John Harington, a prominent soldier and tutor to Prince Henry (i.e. Charles’s brother), clarified in his translation of Orlando Furioso (1591), reprinted by Field, that he knew that his choice of printer would have appealed to those who remained within Prince Henry’s circle after Essex’s fall.
Field also independently printed a pamphlet, *The Copie of a Letter Sent out of England to Don Bernardin Mendoza* (1588), while Wolfe was printing Burghley’s. Given that by late August and early September of 1588 various rumours about the Armada had started to circulate, it is clear that through this pamphlet Burghley wanted to make England’s victory over Spain widely known. The cultural ramifications of the decision to publicise news of victory exemplifies the role played by military news pamphlets in print in an age of pre-modern communications.

**Conclusion**

As Gary Taylor has recently observed, “every bookseller had to decide which, if any, books he should publish himself, by paying for their wholesale manufacture.” If Taylor’s point is correct, it is reasonable to suggest that when the threat of the Armada loomed ever larger, patriotic and anti-Spanish ballads, news pamphlets, and other types of military-oriented books, such as the material Wolfe and Field printed, might have found a special place in the most visible shelves of their bookshops. In discussing the contemporary printing trade, we need to differentiate between printing and publishing. Printing a work doesn’t necessarily argue financial commitment because the printer would have been paid by someone else. Publishing, on the other hand, requires financial investment and is a more convincing sign of either business or ideological commitment – or, indeed, both. Through our consideration of Wolfe, who started out as a printer but moved into publishing exclusively, we have seen that either printing or publishing military-oriented books had the potential to be a lucrative practice.

Because of the lack of regular circulation and editorial objectivity, news pamphlets and news ballads of the 1580s and the 1590s have not received much scholarly attention. However, if we consider them in a particular historical context such as the Spanish Armada or the contemporary warfare in the Low Countries, we can see that cheap print functioned as a public medium to distribute news and propaganda by disseminating patriotic sentiments or by demoralising enemies just as today’s newspapers do. Moreover, what is also important is that unlike a traditional view of cheap print for the vulgar or common sort, its military subjects, incorporating interests of the Elizabethan leading military figures, such as Leicester, Sidney, and Essex, of middling ranks, and of the illiterate population who were often read to, provided a public discourse.

Given, then, that the growing public discourse on military affairs in the 1580s and 1590s was prompted by ballads and news pamphlets on war, I suggest that the influx of news pamphlets permeating into the public sphere should be established earlier than the mid- or late-seventeenth century. As Taylor has also observed, if indeed the bookshop had been “the Elizabethan and Jacobean precursor of the Restoration coffee shop,” the emergence of the public sphere, as it is formulated by Jürgen Habermas, would have started in the bookstalls or printers’ shops clustered in St Paul’s churchyard. In this sense, it can be concluded that contemporary news pamphlets and ballads not only
provide a first-hand picture of war experience under Elizabethan conditions, but they also illustrate how our conception of a public sphere might have developed.

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12 Shaaber 284.


17 Deloney, Thomas. *A New Ballet of the Strange and Most Cruell Whippes Which the Spanyards Had Prepared to Whipp and Torment English Men and Women. 1588.


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21 According to Collins’s list of news pamphlets in 1590, for example, 11 pamphlets out of 25 were printed by John Wolfe. Collins 2-12. See also G. B. Harrison, “Books and Readers, 1591-4,” *The Library* (1927) 273-302.


23 Raven 55.

24 Raven 56.

25 Voss 77-8. Raymond 100.

26 For example, Richard Jones, who specialised in Ballads, printed Henry Kirkham’s *A Ditty of Encouragement to English men to be bold to fight in Defence of prince and country* (1588). While Jones is best-known for his publication of the first edition of Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* (1590), he is a man who printed many contemporary military-oriented books such as George Gascoigne’s *The Spoyle of Antwerpe* (1576), George Whetstone’s *The Honourable Reputation of a Soldier* (1585), Sir John Smythe’s military treatises *Certain Discourses Military* (1590) and *Certain Instructions* (1594; 1595). Henrie Bynneman,
a printer of George Gascoigne’s *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowers* (1573), printed an English translation of Appian, entitled *An Anciente Historie and Exquisite Chronicle of Romane Warre* (1578) (which is considered one of possible sources of Shakespeare’s Roman plays), Leonardo and Thomas Digges’s *A Geometrical Practise, named Pantometria* (1571) and *An Arithmetical Militare Treatise, named Stratioticos* (1579). Thomas East, who was called the father of English music printing, published an English translation of Niccolò Machiavelli’s *Arte of Warre* (1588, third edition).


31 Parmelee 868.

32 Parmelee 868.


36 In this regard, it is hardly surprising that the 1596 quarto edition of *Faerie Queene* was printed by Richard Field.


40 *State Papers 1589-1601* 454.


43 Woodfield 35.

44 Woodfield 37.


