

1. WHAT IS MILITARY HISTORY . . . ?

The story of campaigns and battles? The assessment of leaders, tactics and strategy? The retirement task of old soldiers? A luxury enjoyed by peaceful societies? History's most passionate dramas? The mainstay of western historiography? Narrow technicalities? An inseparable part of the study of society? What is military history?

Michael Howard

'Military history' can be simply defined as the history of armed forces and the conduct of war, and for many years it was a discrete, finite, specialist study. In the United Kingdom it emerged during the eighteenth century, with studies of Marlborough's wars on the continent and of what were generically described as 'the wars in Germany'. It developed with studies of the Napoleonic wars, especially the Peninsular and Waterloo campaigns, and the campaigns of the British armies in North America and India. By the mid-nineteenth century the prime characteristics of British military historiography were clear.

'Military history' was the study of the campaigns of a small, volunteer British army, fighting, invariably overseas, against either a comparable European force or inchoate 'native' armies. So far as British society as a whole was concerned, they might have been fighting on the moon.

During the great expansion of British historical studies in the latter half of the nineteenth century, military history remained a subject apart, a small backwater attracting only members of the armed services and their fellow travellers. Naval history was in little better shape. The connection between naval success and national survival was clear to all historians of the Elizabethan age from Froude onward, while that between sea power and imperial expansion had been pointed out by English writers like the Colomb brothers even before Mahan published his deceptively simple theories in the 1890s. But any serious analysis of the relationship between British naval and economic strength had to await Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, published in 1976.

Military history was thus in Britain a 'special subject' with which few serious scholars concerned themselves. Even the attempts by patriotic universities to revive it before 1914 had very limited success. Colonel G. F. R. Henderson saw that the American Civil War had significantly different lessons to teach from the European campaigns, but even his studies became the narrowest of campaign histories which stressed the similarities with the Napoleonic wars rather than the differences. For nearly half a century the Chair of Military History at Oxford was occupied by journalists or retired soldiers, who made little effort to broaden the scope of their subject. Yet even before 1914 the traditional concept of military history was archaic, as continental historians were very well aware.

For the British, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars were qualitatively little different from those which preceded them: invasion threats thwarted by naval supremacy, small colonial campaigns, continental intervention by a small regular force whose contribution to the final victory was understandably exaggerated. To the continental powers, however, those wars brought military, political and social transformation. Clausewitz was not unique in perceiving that after them things could never be the same again; but he saw more clearly than most that the limited warfare of the eighteenth century was not the norm it was assumed to be by British historians, but the product of a particular social and political structure that had had its day. War had now to be studied, as Hans Delbrück was to study it, in the framework of social and political history. It was clear to continental historians between 1870 and 1914, like Bernhardi and von der Goltz, that social and political as well as technological change would transform for better or worse, the nature of war. Even so, the only change they could conceive was one of scale: the wars of nations would in future be fought in larger and bloodier campaigns, but within the framework laid down by Napoleon and Moltke. Campaign history thus remained central to their interests, and what happened, or was likely to, away from the battlefield was left out of account.

The two World Wars changed all that. It might still be on the battlefield that decisions were reached, but the nature of the decision was so clearly determined by a multiplicity of factors - economic, technological, logistical, social, moral - that the history of those wars could not possibly be told purely in terms of their campaigns. The military historian might still focus on his traditional operational interests, but to understand and explain what happened during those operations he had to extend his interests so broadly as to make virtually a takeover bid for the writing of global history. Conversely, social and political historians of the belligerent countries, however disinclined they might be to soil their hands

with so disreputable a subject as military history, had to acquire a working knowledge of it if they were to understand the impact of those wars on the societies they were studying.

In this respect historians were doing no more than returning to an older tradition. There is no 'military history' as such of classical antiquity, or even of the Middle Ages. These were societies organised for war, constantly at war, and their structure and their activity cannot be dissociated. 'Military history' as a speciality is a luxury which can be enjoyed only by atypically peaceful societies, and it is perhaps an indication of how peaceful our own society is today that military history in its narrowest operational sense should be enjoying so remarkable a boom. But underlying and behind all this lies the sombre need to study the history of war: to understand why our society is what it is, as well as what it might become.

Brian Bond

Clausewitz wrote that 'the decision by arms is for all major and minor operations in war what cash payment is in commerce'. By analogy all military history, though sometimes dealing with non-operational matters, must ultimately be related to war and combat. When I first began to specialise in military history, some twenty-five years ago, it was a badly neglected field among academics, partly no doubt because there were few established university posts in the subject. Regrettably this is still the case, though there has been a tremendous expansion in research and publications – as illustrated for example in the annual survey *War and Society Newsletter*, or in the London University list of theses in progress.

Twenty-five years ago there was also a sharper distinction between those who considered themselves to be military historians (nearly all former officers such as 'Boney' Fuller and Cyril Falls), and other historians with some interest in war. Traditional military history was essentially concerned with tactics and strategy; it tended to stress the significance of 'great captains' more than such aspects as war production, manpower allocation and civilian morale.

Sir Basil Liddell Hart, who died in 1970, was an outstanding practitioner in the traditional style whose qualities and limitations are evident in his last book, a *History of the Second World War*.

Although this kind of military history is still extremely popular (witness the outpouring of books on particular campaigns or battles of the two World Wars) many students of warfare are now concerned to place operations in their full historical context of war aims, the economic and social structure of warring states and the

interaction between war and civil society. The Fontana *War and Society in Europe* series edited by Geoffrey Best, to which my own latest book was a contribution, epitomises the contemporary concern of military historians to portray war 'in the round'. Probably the outstanding individual influence on this trend has been that of Professor Michael Howard, whose teaching and publications both inculcate the importance of treating warfare in the broadest possible historical context. John Keegan was also surely right (in *The Face of Battle*) to argue that a great deal of traditional military history was stereotyped in its approach to combat and cliché-ridden in its descriptions: military historians in short can profit from the techniques and insights of allied disciplines. A good example, in my opinion, is Tony Ashworth's *Trench Warfare 1914–1918* (1980) which employs the sociologist's approach to examine the 'live and let live system' on the Western Front. Dr Ashworth's study also exemplifies a praiseworthy modern concern to pay due attention to the combat experience of ordinary fighting men as distinct from the staff and the high command. As long ago as 1969 Marc Ferro, co-director of the French journal *Annales*, broke away from the traditional campaign structure in his study *The Great War 1914–1918*. More recently, following his trilogy on French military history from 1870 via Verdun to 1940 which brilliantly interwove the political and cultural strands, Alistair Horne has written a superb account of the Algerian conflict aptly entitled *A Savage War of Peace* (1977). This type of complex guerrilla war without clear-cut fronts and battles will surely provide the toughest challenge to military historians of the second half of the twentieth century.

Perhaps there is a tendency now to focus on 'the context' at the expense of the heart of the matter: war and combat. This is partly because many students are interested in such aspects as defence economics, weapons procurement and civil-military relations rather than war *per se*. Partly too in the nuclear age the notion has rightly gained acceptance that armed forces in most European countries exist primarily to deter rather than to wage war. The sudden and unexpected Falklands campaign was a salutary reminder that even in pacifistic democracies armed forces must, in the last resort, be able to fight.

Many laymen seem to identify the subject of military history, with the collection of militaria, or a fascination with regimental records and the minutiae of distant battles. These interests are perfectly respectable but they do not engage my interest compared to, say, large issues of military policy in peace-time and high level decision-making in war. At the other end of the spectrum to military antiquarianism, a great deal of writing about post-1945 defence issues lacks the essential historical ingredients of reasonably com-

plete documentation and adequate perspective. It may be perfectly satisfactory as international relations or political science but not as history.

Although insufficiently appreciated in academic circles, I believe that military history, broadly interpreted as above, is quite as intrinsically important and as demanding a speciality as other branches of history. Its documentary sources, vast historiography and peculiar problems cannot easily be mastered in fleeting forays from other fields. 'War', Clemenceau asserted, was 'much too serious a thing to be left to the military'. Military history, however, *should* be left to the military historians – provided they take a broad and sophisticated view of their subject.

J. C. A. Stagg

Military history has long been one of the mainstays of western historiography. From the ancient Greeks through to the end of the nineteenth century the study of war – its causes, conduct, and consequences – has been a principal preoccupation of historians, and this concentration of historical effort was assumed to be a fair reflection of the importance of war in human affairs. Yet during the twentieth century, at a time when the significance of war for the human condition has never seemed to be greater, military history has fallen into relative disfavour and neglect, at least among serious historians. The reasons for this development are complex, but basically they centre on differing conceptions of history and its uses by the military and the historical professions. Consequently, military history today is a subject struggling towards a new sense of definition, one which must strive to restore it to something of its former primacy among the fields of historical endeavour.

Traditionally, much military history has been conventional in form, consisting of descriptive narratives about leading figures, campaigns, and decisive battles, while also providing assessments of the adequacy of generalship, strategy, and tactics. The focal point of these writings was often the battle, though, as John Keegan has noted, traditional military history seldom mastered the problems of explaining what actually occurred during these episodes of extreme violence. The chronological range of traditional military history, too, could be considerable, sometimes stretching from the ancient world to the Napoleonic era, and its practitioners often treated war as an abstract phenomenon from which predictable and logical themes, if not actual rules and laws, might be extracted. More varied was the degree to which historians related their discussions of the course of war to other factors – such as geography, climate, politics,

administrative capacities, technology, and social and economic structures – that might have affected the performance of combatants. Here the political context of war-making was usually the most frequently studied factor, largely because war, in essence, has evolved into a form of conflict between nations and states.

Since the Second World War, however, the predominantly political approach to the study of history has given away to a broader range of social, economic, and cultural perspectives. This development has inevitably affected the practice of military history, though the full degree of its potential influence has yet to be felt. Nonetheless, much recent military history now proceeds from an awareness that wars are fought by large numbers of men (and sometimes women) whose needs and concerns can place unprecedented demands on the structures of society and the state. The way in which a nation wages war can be illuminated and transformed by an understanding of those whom a nation chooses to do its fighting, of how it chooses them, and of what happens to the people who experience military service and war. This interest in the social dimension of war has been reinforced by the realisation that the records of many military bureaucracies contain a great mass of very detailed information about large numbers of people who would otherwise remain obscure to professional historians. One striking example of how such records can be exploited is Fred Anderson's study of the social origins of Massachusetts' soldiers during the Seven Years' War which reveals that the conflict was much more of a 'people's war' than had been realised. Moreover, the strains of military mobilisation on Massachusetts society were very great, and that fact has now significantly influenced historians' understanding of the coming of the American Revolution and the war that occurred as its consequence.

Yet, in the last analysis, a truly satisfactory military history should consist of more than the narration and explanation of episodic violence, no matter how sophisticated this may be, and those episodes, in turn, should not be studied simply as reflections of larger patterns and problems in a society, no matter how rich these are in illustrative detail. Military history must redefine itself in the broadest sense as the study of societies at war, and its practitioners, ideally, should strive to understand war both as an instrument of state policy and as a process which can involve large numbers of people in violent experiences of considerable intensity. These experiences can often transform the people and the societies that undergo them. The recent writings of Richard Buel, Charles Royster, and John Shy on the nature and consequences of war in late eighteenth-century America are provocative examples of the potential for military history treated as the study of societies at war. Thus

defined, military history can do justice to the various interests of all its practitioners, and in this form the subject may regain something of the pre-eminent status it once enjoyed among all historians.

David Chandler

To ask a military historian such a question is rather like asking Pontius Pilate to define 'truth'. In fact the enquiry involves two linked questions: not only 'What is military history?', but also 'What is it for?'. Of course there is no simple answer to either query, for there are many different shades of opinion as to perfectly right and proper if a subject is to remain dynamic. It must grow and develop and even explore what may turn out to be the occasional blind-alley. Each military historian must eventually reach his own position – without, it should be hoped, feeling impelled to denounce all that has gone before as irredentist nonsense or at best largely irrelevant *incunabula*.

'History', according to Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 'is experience teaching through examples'. Military history – as part of the broad spectrum of historical study – is in the simplest terms the study of 'Man in War'. It connotes a broad range of subjects inextricably linked to the military affairs of the past, including the human, social, institutional, political and technological aspects as well as the specifically professional sides of 'the bless'd trade'. Knowledge of the wars of the past can assist the understanding of the problems of the present, and even (with the hopes of avoiding the mistakes and misunderstandings that so tragically often give rise to recourse to armed struggles) help us to make some educated guesses about what the future may hold. Man's combative instincts have dominated most periods of the past, and even in the supposedly peaceful years since 1945 there have been over 200 identifiable wars fought at various levels affecting many countries in the Second and Third Worlds in particular. Indeed, the first recorded histories, by such famous names as Homer and Thucydides, were largely devoted to accounts of human struggle, man against man, people against people. There has been little change.

Writing as a lecturer who, for approaching a quarter of a century, has been responsible for sharing in the education of successive generations of officer-cadets and young officers at Sandhurst, it has long been clear that military history itself (as understood in the professional sense) is only one part of the study of the kaleidoscope of warfare. The various strata lead on one from another to develop a comprehensive awareness of the complexities of the whole subject.

Thus military history (in the narrower sense of the study of campaigns, battles and leaders) is one foundation for war studies – the examination of the problems arising from the preparation for, and conduct of, war in the present century, particularly since 1945, together with the factors that have influenced those problems. Higher still up the scale come strategic studies – often the province of Staff Colleges – which have been described as:

the study of modern military organisation, weapons and operations, and also the study of contemporary international and internal armed conflicts in their political, economic and military aspects; the role of alliances and other security systems; disarmament and arms control; strategic doctrines and national defence priorities.

Finally, at the level of the Royal Defence College, comes the consideration of grand strategy and national interest, of alliance policy, and the effective use of deterrence. Yet none of these several levels is mutually exclusive – but rather each draws as necessary from all that has preceded and indeed developed from it. We may hope that the senior planners of the South Atlantic Campaign of 1982 – once the political decision to act had been clearly communicated – took into account (or were at least aware of) the salient points that could be culled from the experiences of Suez, Normandy, Sicily, Gallipoli and even the Crimea (unopposed though the landing was, it was certainly on hostile soil) and Egypt (1801). Major-General Sir Jeremy Moore has mentioned that he found his knowledge of James Wolfe and Québec helpful in overcoming what Wavell called 'the loneliness of high command'. Thus military history has a part to play at all levels of a soldier's development – but above all at the foundation of his career when it is important to inculcate *esprit d'armée* in the aspiring officer. As Napoleon remarked, 'One must speak to the soul: it is the only way to electrify the man'.

I am also a military historian by inclination and interest in the fullest senses. Since sixth-form days at Marlborough, I have been fascinated by the military affairs of the past in general – and of the Marlburian and Napoleonic periods in particular. My particular focus is on the development of the military science and art, but I am also interested by the interplay of personality – the vital human element without which much else is, to me, somewhat meaningless. I am not a Tolstoin in that I am convinced that Napoleon made a lasting mark on the military aspects of his times – and on subsequent generations. For me, the subject does not at any level connote militarism any more than the study of medicine propagates disease. I do not hold with the view that a prime function of a military historian is to debunk legends and uncover misrepresentations.

Certainly he must report his findings if they do run counter to accepted belief, but the subject deserves more than this, and there are still large areas even in the Napoleonic area which are virtually *terra incognita*, and even more in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

It is also much in my mind that the study of military history is not solely for the academic élite – its study is also an ideal source of pleasure for the layman with a genuine interest in the ‘passionate dramas’ of the past. Indeed, military history can be all things to all men. Almost any approach, providing it observes scholarly rules concerning the testing of evidence and the drawing of sustainable conclusions, is welcome – and all have a valuable role to play providing they accord the same toleration to other views that they require themselves. Even the disagreements – reflecting the greatest attributes of the subject in its many forms – are intellectually stimulating. As Professor Geyl remarked, ‘History is an argument without end’.

Geoffrey Best

What do we go to the military historian for? Clearly not for the general history of war or for war’s place in the general history of our species. Those big ventures in the war history business call on many expertises besides any merely military one. What the military historian can contribute to our understanding of history in general may be indispensable (besides whatever value it may have independently in its own right) but so will other sorts of historians’ contributions be indispensable; economic, diplomatic, political and so on.

What then distinguishes the military history sort? I have long had a personal interest in this question. Did involvement in ‘war and society’ studies or research into the ethics and law of war make one a ‘military historian’? By now I feel sure it didn’t and doesn’t. Military history’s speciality, I conclude, is Battles and how to fight them, Campaigns and how to conduct them, and the ways armed forces gear themselves up for these special tasks. All the rest of the war-related work that has been going on since the 1960s under such descriptions as ‘war studies’ (Michael Howard, its founding father and continuing father-figure), ‘war and society’ (launched above all by Arthur Marwick and his team at the Open University) and ‘armed forces and society’ (Morris Janowitz’s empire, strongly social-scientific) is, in its better bits and in its educational effects, magnificent – but it is not military history proper, and even the best of it may not include any proper military history at all.

The truth is that most of us dedicated to the study of armed forces and society whether in war or peace do not necessarily know much about the sharp end of our subject. This is nothing to be ashamed of. We may not need to know anything about it. The armed forces we hold steady in our sights exist and inter-relate with society and state whether they’re at war or not; and most of them, for most of the time, are not. But their *raison d’être* nevertheless remains Fighting: for a minority of them, the fighting itself, and for the rest (‘the tail’), support and supply of the fighters. Knowledge of how fighting is done, and what specifically military things and thoughts make it possible, is the military man’s peculiar province, which outsiders can no more expect to enter without hard and humble study than they can expect to become proficient in theology, or solid geometry, or socio-linguistics.

Military history proper is a lot more complicated and technical than at first sight appears to historians like myself who are perhaps better described as ‘militarily engaged’. Not presuming to speak for anyone other than myself, but rejoicing to have found myself one of very many non-military men and women enlarging and enriching the field of war studies by our involvement, an explanation of my limitations on the military history side, strictly defined, might run thus. First, so much of what was written by the military men who obviously were in a position to know what it took to manage armed forces and conduct battles was petty, parochial, and patriotic in the bad, anti-scientific way: narrow, complacent, insular. Put off by so much that was useless for serious scholarship other than the study of the mentality of those who wrote such stuff and those who read it, one missed the pearls of undoubted price lying in among the garbage. Second, the actual fighting in a war, about which military historians become most excited, did not seem to merit more weight in the total analysis of war than the many other elements (economic, psychological, cultural and so on) which military historians proper usually neglected and which demanded a bit of positive discrimination. Justifiably desirous of putting into the history of wars and warfare so much that warriors left out, one was prone to skip or skirt what they alone were sure to put in. War may indeed be too important to be left to the generals, but, after all, you can’t wage it without any generals at all.

Military history, then, I judge to be the history of fighting and of the proximate means of fighting: military organisation and mentality, movement and logistics, weapons and equipment, strategic planning, tactical training, and battle behaviour. This is by no means the same as whole war history or the comprehensive understanding of the relations between armed forces and society upon which war history rests. But it is an inseparable part of it, and

really good histories of wars and war-making include it. The first such a one which gave me a shock of recognition still seems to me a model of its kind: Michael Howard's *Franco-Prussian War*. But to describe that simply as 'military history' would be like calling Marilyn Monroe simply an 'actress'.

John Terraine

To date, the main thrust of my historical writing has been the military history of the First World War. I began in 1960 with a campaign narrative: *Mons: The Retreat to Victory*; nine more books about that war followed, the last of which, in 1982, *White Heat: The New Warfare 1914-19*, is unashamedly a study of its technology. I said in my Foreword:

On the pages that follow there is very little strategy, scarcely any politics, no ideology and – I confess – almost no psychology. This is a book about the greatest First Industrial Revolution, war. In other words, it is about the very inner nature of the war, and may thus, I hope, illuminate its other aspects too.

I think this declares my hand: obviously, I must be a 'military historian', but more and more, in seeking to interpret the often amazing phenomena of the First World War, I saw it as the watershed of an industrial age. Before then, the technological revolution based on coal as a power source and steel as a material had been more or less controllable; afterwards, never. By this interpretation, it is evidently impossible to separate the military aspects from the productive forces of the societies that waged the war, or from the societies themselves. Modern military history, in other words, is not distinct from social history; it is a part of it – a very important part.

Three 'great' wars, with illuminating similarities, fall within the period during which the industrial states were based entirely or chiefly on the coal/steel technology: the American Civil War and the two World Wars. All, in expanding degrees, shared three fundamental features:

- 1 all three were fought *à outrance*, demanding the 'unconditional surrender', the absolute defeat, of one side or the other;
 - 2 all three were wars of masses: armies of millions, huge fleets, finally vast air forces;
 - 3 all three were immensely destructive of human life and all its appurtenances.
- These three statements encapsulate the great wars of the epoch.

They are closely linked to each other: the 'total' war aim is intimately connected with the total involvement of large populations; the scale of death and destruction is intimately linked to the state of technology and the scale of mobilisation.

It is the capacity conferred by industrialisation that unifies the period, in war as in peace. The steam locomotive and the steamship, besides their economic significance, were also important social factors, conquering distance between communities and nations – and they were powerful instruments of war. The same, of course, is true of the international combustion engine in all its aspects; the agricultural tractor and the tank are blood-brothers; the conquest of the air was very soon seen as a means of conquering ground. Mass production clothed, equipped and fed the mass armies; even the homely sewing machine has its military history. Canned food transformed the problems of quartermasters as well as grocers. By 1917 a staff officer noted that at British GHQ:

Nearly every one of the ramifications of civil law and life has its counterpart in the administrative departments . . . and for a population bigger than any single unit of control (except London) in England.

It is impossible to exaggerate this revolution in the military function.

In the First World War, a second industrial revolution, based on petroleum as a power source and increasingly using light metals, already played a large part, and an even larger in the Second, without ever displacing coal and steel. Electronics, a war instrument in America between 1861–65, made great advances between 1914–18, and still more between 1939–45. And in that war a Third Industrial Revolution, using plastics and computers, came to the fore with its new power source: atomic energy. So military history, in the modern world, displays a unity and continuum under the surface of constant change which derides all attempts to isolate its ingredients. It cannot be separated from the large, increasingly urban, populations, from their means of production and their productivity, from their technology and the techniques which it imposed. Nor can it be separated from their social systems, their physical condition and their ideologies. Armies, in the age of masses, are peoples in arms, putting their survival to the most critical test.

FURTHER READING

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John Terraine's most recent book is *The Royal Airforce in the European War, 1939-45* (London, 1985).