

Military History and Education: A View from 2020

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Military history serves a variety of purposes, including institutional education, academic scholarship, popular interest, commercial opportunity, and collective myth-making. All and each needs to be considered when the subject is evaluated, and to judge one by the standards of another is not necessarily helpful, and can be positively misleading. The question why teach military history might seem to shrink the options to the educational process, but that is not, however, in practice the case, for teaching, understood in the widest sense, embraces the question of the nature and sustaining of civic militarism, and also overlaps with the issue of commercial opportunity. To approach the subject in another perspective, one that draws heavily on the role and resonance of civic militarism, there is also the question of the point of reference. The question ‘Why teach military history?’ can be approached in the abstract, but it really depends on the country and society that is in the forefront. The issue is different, or, at least appears very different, in Sweden or Israel, Spain or Estonia, Ireland or South Korea. As a reminder of the variety of social contexts and needs, in many states, indeed, the teaching of military history is an aspect not simply of civic patriotism, but also of a wider social engagement that can owe something to conscription, as in Finland, Israel and Switzerland. In these cases, as also more generally, the teaching of military history fulfils pedagogic purposes, but also helps in fostering the engagement of the civilian soldier, including the civilian reservist. Thus, morale, as widely conceived, plays a role in the reasons for teaching military history, and also in the content and tone of the teaching.

Conscription can be unrelated to immediate threats, the case, for example, of Switzerland, but, usually, this is not the position. Thus, the teaching of military history, whether professional, educational or civic, is an aspect of a threat environment, and the assessment of value has to take note of this context. That, indeed, helps explain the role of military history in America’s culture wars, as its downplaying is associated with a downplaying or alteration of the threat environment; and vice versa.

The prominence of the threat environment is also the case with societies, such as contemporary Iran and Myanmar, where the politics of paranoia are crucial to the mobilisation of enforced consent on behalf of the government. In some states, moreover, such as Turkey, Pakistan and, to a lesser extent, Brazil, the military present themselves as crucial to national integrity and identity.

Considering these and other cases serve to underline the unusual, not to say eccentric, character of Western commitment both to intellectual independence, and to academic and educational detachment from public politics. Indeed, on the world case, the pressure of public politics on education will probably become more salient as China rises in relative importance, not least as an economic-political model. This underlines the need to appreciate the diversity of national cultures

within which military affairs are considered, with the teaching of military history presented as an aspect of the politics of these cultures.

The teaching of military history in the USA, by far the world's leading military power, is currently a matter of controversy. This is not least due to the widely-repeated charge that this teaching is being downplayed by the 'politically correct'. Indeed, it is widely argued that they are preventing the appointment of military historians in American universities and marginalising the subject as a whole. Is this true? Does it matter? Is military history desirable, a 'politically correct' view, or, indeed, from 'non-politically-correct' dimension and the specific perspective of military change, not least technological change, the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs and its sequel 'Transformation', relevant? Does military history have a future?

The last is the key issue, both for the USA and more generally, but let us first address the question of whether the subject is being deliberately downplayed or discarded. Once one moves from the easy polemic of press discussion, it is possible to see this in two lights. On the one hand, the problems facing military history are not unique to the subject but are part of a wider issue that involves the range of subjects that were central to the teaching of history prior to the 1960s. Thus, this is as much a question of constitutional history, of legal history, of diplomatic history, of ecclesiastical history, and of high political history, as much as of military history.

Indeed, constitutional history and pre-1900 diplomatic history have fared considerably worse than military history, not least because they do not have the support offered by the military academies and by widespread public interest from outside higher education, each of which ensures that military history is buoyant, whatever the situation in the universities. To a limited extent, professional interest in the law operates in a similar fashion.

The sense of a wider issue of shifts in the nature and understanding of history that are also relevant to other sub-disciplines, is not one that most military historians tend to grasp, as they generally have the tunnel vision common to most subject specialists. Nevertheless, this wider issue needs addressing, not least because of the extent to which this is an aspect of a more wholesale marginalisation of the longer-term continuity of American history. In part, this reflects a jettisoning of a historical tradition that looks back toward colonial days, the struggle for independence, and the early decades of the republic, a tradition sometimes, inaccurately, referred to as the 'dead white men' approach.

In its place, has come an emphasis on more recent decades, and on social forces and movements, as the agents of change. The same process can be seen at work in Britain, although there, as in the USA, it generally fails to make sufficient alliance for other factors that have moulded recent history including not only economic trends, fiscal policy and high politics, but, also, the impact of war. Thus, for example, World War Two had more of a consequence for twentieth-century American

developments, and was more central to them, than Civil Rights; this was the case not simply as far as America's international position was concerned, but also with reference to its development as both state and society. War had even more traumatic consequences for the internal development of France and Russia, Germany and Japan.

An emphasis on social forces as the causes and agents of change can misleadingly make military history appear redundant or simply the expression of social developments. This, incidentally, is an approach that helps those on the Left who see 'peoples' warfare' as bound to prevail over regular, professional forces, an approach that is of limited validity, but one that flourished during the period of so-called wars of national liberation, and was powerfully advanced in the USA by particular readings of the Vietnam War. The current terrorism/insurrection in Iraq is seen by some in the same light, but it is necessary to note, first, the military perspective – that insurrections do not necessarily succeed, and, secondly, the political point that, by any standards, many of these movements were and are highly undesirable.

The relative diminution of military history thus reflects wider currents including those in both society and in historical scholarship. In the former case, it is pertinent to note the degree to which the individualism, hedonism and atomisation of society associated with both 1960s **and** post-1960s values sapped general adherence to collectivist solutions and commitments. Thus, conscription, and the accompanying mental attitudes and social patterns, no longer commanded support, and, in part, this is relevant for the context of military history, at least compared to the 1950s.

In the case of historical scholarship, it is possible when discussing the relative decline of military history to point both to the rise of social history and cultural studies, and to the influence on historical work of perspectives derived from other social sciences including anthropology and collective psychology. This process is not restricted to the USA, which indicates that locating the issue solely in terms of America's culture wars is inadequate. It requires a broader contextualisation that is alive to the interaction of American and international developments.

Turning more specifically to the history of war, there is a tension between military history as understood by many, but by no means all, of those who are interested in the subject, and the history of war. For many, particularly, but not only, in the non-academic world, this is a subject that should be about fighting, about battles and campaigns, troops and weapons. This operational dimension is indeed important, and military history should not be demilitarised, but it is not the complete subject. Indeed, part of the tension in the discussion of military history, not least among specialists, revolves not so much around its neglect, but, instead, is in terms of how the subject is treated. Here, it is necessary to note differences among military historians. The operational historians, sometimes unfairly, but frequently all too accurately, referred to in terms of drum and trumpet history, are indeed neglected within the academy, but those looking at wider dimensions, such as the staples of war and society, and war and the state, are generally assured of an audience.

This is further the case because the ‘history’ in these cases is as much explored by sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists, as by those seen more conventionally as historians. In part, therefore, the discussion of military history today is a case of tensions among military historians and about the character of such history. This debate is not always explicit, but, in practice, exists not simply in terms of the content of the subject, but also of the way in which topics are pursued and presented, as well as of the powerful issues of patronage and appointment, and publication strategies. These latter issues are difficult to discuss, but are none the less important for that. Indeed, this can lend a shadowboxing character to public debate, with vague remarks about general attitudes when, in practice, it is the views of a small number of individuals operating in particular institutions that are crucial and at issue. Those of publishers are also particularly important, because, if the major presses do not publish military history, then it seems to lack scholarly weight. This makes it far more difficult for academics in this field to obtain posts in leading universities, and there is no doubt that that is a factor in the politics and culture of appointments; not least because of the American habit of validating opinions and individuals by their labels, as if a book or person was necessarily better because published by, or at, Yale than Oklahoma.

It is easier to probe questions about the appropriateness of the standard approach to military history, because this moves us from the more shadowy world of patronage. This approach is characterised by a fascination with technology, both definition of capability and an explanation of change, and by a focus on the Western way of war. The West dominates attention not simply because it is indeed important, but because it is seen as setting global standards for effectiveness. This, however, is an aspect of a misleading tendency to dismiss non-Western military history as primitive, a tendency that makes it more difficult to devise an appropriate doctrine for waging war with such powers.

These fundamental parameters of the subject are, in turn, linked to other issues. The fascination with technology and, more generally, with the material culture of war, contributes to a presentation of military history in terms of revolutionary developments, rather than of incrementalism, understood in general in terms of an evolutionary change based on trial and error. This is mistaken, as incrementalism is crucial, not least in terms of the response to allegedly revolutionary developments. The latter have to be grasped, a response defined, and the response embedded in terms of procurement and training. These responses involve what may be seen as cultural dimensions and these repay attention in a subject that is frequently overly oriented toward battle, whether operational or in terms of the experience of war. A response open to cultural dimensions, is also less overly determined, not least in terms of the habitual emphasis on the material aspects of war. More generally, this serves as a reminder that the subject is far from ‘closed’ or ‘done’.

The treatment of war in universities can be mocked by focusing on some research topics that are indeed far removed from fighting, and, more seriously, by asking whether an emphasis on

civilians, atrocities, or the memorialisation of war, all three of which play a major role in the literature, has been pushed too far. These are relevant points, and some of the war and society literature indeed tells us far more about society than it does about war, and more about victims than about fighting. I note this tension in the discussion of military history by colleagues in my own university.

Nevertheless, in terms of conflict, it is also clear that victory is obtained when one of the sides is persuaded that it has lost, and this involves more than just fighting. The cultural dimension is also present in the shape of very different responses to loss and suffering. Current conflicts around the world serve as an abrupt reminder that victory and defeat, suffering and loss, have very different meanings in particular contexts, and success in such conflict, in part, depends on an accurate perception of these contrasts.

Far from being ignored, war also plays a crucial role in international relations studies, not least those on the rise and fall of great powers. Again, there is scarcely any sense that the subject is ignored from this perspective. It can, however, be treated in an overly reductionist fashion, as in the tendency to ascribe likely, if not inevitable, results to more powerful economies. This was seen in Paul Kennedy's influential *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (1988), which encapsulated a widespread tendency.

There is an undoubted lack of interest in most American universities in military history. This is particularly true of the Ivys, in several of which the serious neglect of the subject contrasts pointedly with the impressive memorials to the many who lost their life in war. This is the case, for example, with Yale and its powerful presentation of loss in the First World War. This lack of interest is also true of the University of California system. Furthermore, a number of universities that were noted for the subject have lost relevant posts, as with Florida State, or have become less dynamic, as with Hawaii Pacific. There are a number of universities with important programmes, including Chapel Hill, Ohio State, and Texas A and M; but there is a problem at the senior level, as John Lynn has pointed out: many of the best and the brightest did not go to graduate school in the USA in the 1970s and 1980s, those who did rarely chose military history, and, of those, few chose American military history. Thus, there is a lack of suitable senior applicants comparable to those in other fields, such as early-modern European military; but student interest lies precisely in modern American military. So the profession faces a major crisis here.

This of course matters. Military history is a key element of military studies, a point to which I will turn later, and it is unsatisfactory that these are at best spottedly developed in the American education system. I was once asked by a student at Chapel Hill why it mattered, and I replied that if he became a politician it would be of great value if he understood the potential and problems of war. More generally, this point might be made about public opinion as a whole.

As the study of war matters, so it is obviously desirable. The question is whether military history as an aspect of this study is relevant, and if so why, and thus how. This idea of relevance was strongly challenged, directly and indirectly, by the belief in the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). This was advanced strongly in the 1990s and early-2000s as a description of changes in American military capability, and as a prospectus for fresh change. It is instructive to consider the RMA as it indicates the tension sometimes discerned between (new) doctrine and historical perspectives, and was earlier employed within the military to deny the value of military history. Integral to the RMA were a number of concepts each rich in acronyms and jargon. The common focus is on smart doctrine: operational planning and practice, in order to take advantage of a new generation of weapons and the possibilities posed by advances in information technology. The emphasis on precise information as a means, as well as a tool, of conflict, relates to its use in order to locate forces accurately, as well as to destroy enemy units with semi-automated weapons. Accurate targeting is required if precision weaponry is to be effective. This, in turn, entails 'information dominance', in order to deny such a capability to opponents. The RMA also calls for 'network-centric warfare': a focus on the new capability of information systems, rather than on traditional practices and structures of command and control. The concept thus linked developments in weapon systems with a doctrine that meshed with theories of modernization that rest on the adoption of technological systems. In the language of the RMA, weaponry was designed to ensure what are termed dominant manoeuvre, precision engagements, full-dimensional protection, focused logistics, and information warfare.

Broader requirements were also served by this creation of a belief that total victory can be ensured through a specific type of High Intensity Conflict. These tasks and assumptions can be discussed, without any suggestion of prioritisation, in terms of liberal internationalism, the particular requirements of American foreign policy, and the growing disjuncture between highly ambitious Western goals and a widespread reluctance to risk casualties. Liberal internationalism became part of the new world order that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the argument, fed in particular by the atrocities in Rwanda in 1994 and Bosnia in 1995, that there was a duty to intervene in order to prevent humanitarian disasters. Such intervention presupposed success, and relied on the notion of a clear capability gap between the two sides. Indeed, from the humanitarian perspective, the forces of good had to be successful in order to avoid the suffering that would result from a difficult conquest. This concept helped explain the difficulties faced by Anglo-American representatives when discussing Iraqi casualties during and after the war of 2003.

From the perspective of American foreign policy, the RMA also apparently explained how policy goals could be fulfilled, as this policy rested in part on a military underpinning, and in particular on how best to forestall threats. The need to be able to respond to more than one threat simultaneously, was regarded as particularly necessary, and the force multiplication apparently offered by the RMA was especially important in this context. In short, the RMA made American

foreign policy possible: it contributed not only to strategic concerns but also to foreign policy interests around the world. Looked at more critically, the RMA aided in a militarisation of this policy in which, furthermore, the views of allies were of limited significance.

The value of the RMA as an analysis can be debated, not least the extent to which current conflicts apparently qualify its applicability. However, the key issue here is whether the RMA made military history redundant by moving warmaking forward to a new plane, as was claimed. The answer is no, for aside from the point that the RMA can be historicised by reference to other real or supposed revolutions in military affairs, an approach on which there is a useful literature, the claim that the RMA made history redundant clashes with other approaches. It is not so much that there are unchanging realities in war, though that is the theme of a literature, as, rather, that military history throws light on the variety of military trajectories in the world as different societies have responded in contrasting ways to the opportunities and problems of their situation. This can be seen further if the emphasis in military development is placed on changes in ‘tasking’, in short on the goals and functions of the military, rather than a focus on capability, in particular on weaponry. Understanding the contrasting rationales of militaries, and how they rest on different strategic cultures is important because this provides a way to understand the military drives of opponents. This is particularly important for the West as force projection has become so important since the close of the Cold War.

Military history thus has a direct value as an aspect of understanding strategic culture, which now is a key concept in military studies with military history proving a key aspect in these studies. Military history is also important as the repository of experience and thus the background of training. Experience is particularly important, because war, at the tactical, operational or strategic level, is about the management of risk. Experience helps define the understanding of risk. Furthermore, when two powers begin a war, each generally assumes that it can win, and at least one is wrong. History helps explain victory and defeat and also shows that the balance between them was frequently very narrow. At the tactical level, staff rides are a valuable part of training, while operational exercises can indicate principles of manoeuvrist warfare, such as concentration and defeating opponents in detail (separately).

This is a continuing process. A handbook for the Nonresident Seminar Syllabus of the Strategy and Policy Division of the College of Distance Education of the United States Naval War College noted ‘The overall purpose of the National Security Decision Making Course is to educate military officers and U.S. government civilians in the effective development and command of armed forces within the constraints of national resources’. The case-studies have included Theory and Prototype Studies; The Classical Prototype: Athens vs. Sparta; The American Revolution and Maritime Theory; Policy and Strategy in a Revolutionary Era: Europe 1792-1815; Limited War and Escalation Control: The Wars of German Unification; The Russo-Japanese War and Modern Naval Strategic Thought; World War II: The United States, The Grand Alliance, and Global War; The Cold

War, Containment and Korea; Limited War in a Revolutionary Setting: The Vietnam Conflict; Limited War in a Global Setting: The Gulf War; Strategies and Policies of Terrorism; and Retrospect and Prospect: The Terror War, the latter two reflecting the response of military educators to the issue of the moment, and the need to make historical courses relevant.

More generally, the need to make historical courses relevant can be seen with a stress on the history of joint warfare. Such operations, and associated doctrine, planning, command structures and procurement, became more important from the 1980s and, even more, 1990s, leading to a more integrated sense of military power, as well as to a questioning of former boundaries between tactical, operational and strategic perspectives and activities. For example, the shift in the strategic nuclear role from air power to submarines in the USA and Britain in the 1960s led to a reconsideration of the doctrine and history of air power in terms of a greater emphasis on joint operations.

The reconceptualization of military power indicates the interplay of ‘real world’ experience in the reformulation of doctrine, a process that also alters the parameters of historical relevance. Thus, American interest in co-operating with local forces, seen in Afghanistan in 2001, led the Army Command and General Staff College Press to publish in 2002 *Compound Warfare. That Fatal Knot*, a collection produced by its Combat Studies Institute on regulars and irregulars fighting in concert. The preface declared, ‘knowing how the dynamics of compound warfare have affected the outcome of past conflicts will better prepare us to meet both present crises and future challenges of a similar nature’.

Reference to history is also widespread elsewhere. For example, in December 2000, Alain Richard, the French Minister of Defence, declared ‘the place of history is fundamental in the formation of officers, in order to illuminate their actions and their role in society’ and, in 1994, the Ministry of Defence had been responsible for the foundation of a Centre d’études d’histoire de la Défense, based at Vincennes from 1995. In Germany and Japan, however, defeat and humiliation in the ‘last war’, and concern about being accused of being militaristic, has lessened professional interest, rather than stimulating it.

A more specific cause for historical debate was provided by the extent to which history was used to provide a frame of reference for debating military options. Thus, before the Iraq War of 2003, there was much reference in Britain to the 1956 invasion of Egypt, the Suez Crisis. In this, as in many other cases, ‘history’ served as a box from which words and images could be pulled for citation. This was seen, moreover, as the frame of reference offered, by outside commentators (sometimes well-informed and often not) for American military activities in Iraq from 2003 moved from being the rapid success of the Gulf War of 1991 to the intractable commitment of the Vietnam War. In turn, in 2007, President George W. Bush cited the chaos in South East Asia that followed American withdrawal in 1973 as a reason for continuing to persist in Iraq. Compared to this questionable (although a speech is not the place for an informed debate), part of the value of military history is that

it should offer the possibility of a more sophisticated usage of references, not least in terms of the public debate.

Claims that a historical perspective on war is irrelevant are misguided, although, as discussion of the RMA indicates, they reflect a powerful impulse within modern American military culture that draws on a wider practice in the West. For at least a quarter-millennium, it has been customary to emphasize the importance of an approach, insight or development by stressing its novel character and consequences; and the search for them has been an important aspect of Western intellectual culture.

This emphasis on innovation has had multiple advantages, and to argue that military history should abandon its focus on the new and revolutionary might seem counter-intuitive, especially if cutting-edge technology is regarded as the great force multiplier. Military realities, however, are both too complex and too dependent on previous experiences to make a focus on change, let alone revolutionary change, helpful. An emphasis on continuities captures the role of limitations, especially of Western tactical, operational and strategic military effectiveness and limitations with regard to non-Western environments; although, of course, continuity does not imply an absence of change. Such an understanding, of both continuity and change, underlines the crucial value of an historical approach.