

Where does theory go in Military History?

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A glazed look in the eye is the standard response to enquiry about the should-be aspect of theory in military history. Indeed, ‘military history is arguably the last stronghold of what historiographers call the “Whig interpretation”,’¹ Dennis’s characteristically bracing start in 2002 to one of his many sparkling essays, was a reflection on both the general absence of theory and the linked poverty of the fall-back theoretical basket of the subject, with such staples as *War and Society*, *Face of Battle*, and *Military Revolutions*. Each of these, of course, is very different in genesis, scope, and content, but all of them are somewhat flawed and far from new. Moreover, as with most branches of history, there is a mix between ideas explicitly borrowed, sometimes very interestingly from other disciplines; and, on the other hand, those generated from within the subject itself, or, in this latter case, in practice more generally, those manifestations of other disciplines generated within History. Both aspects are at play in what is a generally under-theorised subject.

There is certainly a Whiggish bent in some of the established accounts, and notably in terms of what Showalter in 2002 correctly saw as a bias toward progressivism.² Notions of development are especially at fault here. Whiggism is also apt, variously, to be teleological, presentist and secularist. There are also Whiggish tendencies that can be grouped as materialist, in the shape of a Whig triumph grounded in economic and technological ‘progress,’ notably free market liberalism, or idealist, although the two are on a continuum. In historiographical terms, these approaches affirm values in seeking to answer problems. Thus, the interplay of causation and meaning, past and present, and universals and particulars, all play a part.

Although convenient, the Whiggish interpretation and/or mindset face significant conceptual and methodological problems; many of those common to theory more generally. There is, most notably, the problem that the application of a theory can impose a template on events that leaves out what does not fit in, for example signs of Turkish resilience and/or revival in the period 1650-1740, or the continued role of cavalry in the nineteenth century. In contrast, insisting on a granular approach means viewing developments under the immediate circumstances of a particular time, but can risk discarding any major role for theory.

And yet, ironically, the very continuity of established progressivist accounts in theoretical discussion, or at least mention, suggest that, in this respect, there is an opposite to progressivism, in terms of a somewhat stale repetition of long-established views. That point may be difficult to credit, but there is, indeed, a contrast between a sense of progressive adaptability in interpretation provided

by these staples and their apparent prospectus, and, yet, what, in practice, is the closing of the mind presented by the repetition of such views.

Turning to the ‘why?’ question is always instructive, as the Whiggishness and the conceptual conservatism each arise and interact for particular reasons. Rather than assuming some model of inherent and inevitable improvement in both military practice and military history, it is important to consider both the reasons for the Whiggish approach to military history, and its functions. As with the development and use of the very military systems themselves, there is in their discussion a fitness-for-purpose dimension, with a simple account, whether progressive or not, serving the purposes of important constituencies, but also the need for some language to address the topic, and with language understood as including concepts.

Such an account indeed enables military historians to move rapidly to the operational and tactical levels that tend most to interest them and their audiences, and sometimes very aggressively so as with comments that attention should focus on the fighting which, moreover, tends to be overly stressed as the experience of war. More generally, a relatively simplistic theoretical structure deproblematizes, if not simplifies, what might otherwise be difficult conceptual, methodological and historiographical issues, or even pretends or implies that they do not really exist. As such, the sub-discipline of military history can apparently proceed without any need to consider the constant procedural relationship between theory and practice. Moreover, this approach enables those working on a part of military history to feel that they understand, and can explain, the remainder of it, and thereby can readily contextualise and highlight their own contribution.

Both the nature of the subject, and the manner in which it is approached, including the conceptual conservatism involved, is partly due to the origins of military history as vocational training for young (and older) officers. This is not merely a vestigial feature, as much of military history is still written by current or former officers, while many of the ‘consumers’ of military history are students in military academies and other officer-training programmes. These military men are generally oriented, due to their rank, needs, tasks and, often, interests, toward the operational and tactical levels, and a can-do approach; and not to theoretical reflection and, whether or not related to that, nor to conceptual or methodological discussion.

Turning to academics, a Whiggish, or, at least, simplistic account of warfare offers much to non-military historians, who are the overwhelming bulk of the profession, and increasingly so. Although many academic historians (and others) almost seem to wish that war did not exist, or that it could be subsumed within the category of violence,³ and treated thereby as a type of pathology, they tend, nevertheless, to be aware that war has important contextual and causative results. As such, it is difficult to ignore the subject. Yet, that point then poses the issue of how best to respond to the need to discuss war, which is usually done by providing a relatively simple approach. Moreover, such an

approach is apparently best if it shares a non-military history in content and/or theory, as in the case of the thesis of military revolutions; or if the treatment of war essentially presents it, or aspects of it, as epiphenomena of supposedly deeper structural factors.⁴ The latter approach pushes explanation and conceptualisation into these factors while, at least to a degree, deproblematizing military history itself.

The nature of non-military readers should also be considered. The overwhelming majority of the audience for military history are non-academics. Indeed, while military history has declined and shrivelled in academic departments, both for specific reasons and linked to the more general fate of political and diplomatic history, it is flourishing in bookstores, on airport book stacks, on Amazon, and on websites. The general public's interest in history, however, has always been highly presentist. This apparently is a method both for the reader to understand our present situation, and for the writer to inform us about the correct/wise/desirable path into the future. Great public interest, indeed, is something that is saving military history, in the face of academic disdain, and has many positives; but they come with some negatives as well, as part, as it were, of the overall deal.

In practice, moving from audience to content, there are, as is only to be expected of theory when it clashes with reality (a clash hold at bay in most of the Social Sciences and, increasingly, Humanities), serious flaws with the various approaches or theories on offer. They are subject to conceptual, methodological, and empirical qualifications, both in their own right, and with regard to their being able to act as more general accounts and/or explanations of military history. Indeed, some of the scholarship of recent years has challenged such powerful building blocks as technological determinism, the supposed early-modern military revolution, and 'Face of Battle' work. These challenges, however, have not always succeeded in providing a readily accessible alternative

Whatever the approach, the issue often is how far to assume a focus on development and how far, instead, to offer an account that does not rest on such a thesis, and not least with its highly questionable proposition of linear change and its linked ideas of modernisation and modernity. In particular, modernisation and modernity were, and are still, presented, whether explicitly or subliminally, in terms of improvement. However, that approach was to be proved deeply problematic in terms of the successful resistance of opponents to what were held to be cutting-edge military powers. In short, how are North Vietnam in the 1970s or the Taliban in the 1990s-2010s to be built into the model, and its equations?

Moreover, the changing character of the apparent nature of modernity - for example, in the 1990s-2000s, from the 'Revolution in Military Affairs' to 'Transformation,' to 'Wars Among the People,' make this process even more difficult, as the nature, process and chronology of modernisation were, and are, therefore unclear. So also on other scales, and in different contexts. Thus, mobilisation of all the resources of society as the basis for the total war capability of the mid-twentieth century was not what was sought in the 2010s. In turn, confrontation with China, notably

from 2020, drove attention back to symmetrical warfare between major states. That these points were apparent for the present raised the question of whether similar variations had been underplayed in the past, and, indeed, seriously so.

A related, but all-too-common, conceptual flaw, as, very differently, in Martin van Creveld's *Supplying War. Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton*, Rupert Smith's impressive *The Utility of Force. The Art of War in the Modern World*,⁵ and a host of other works, is to presume a central narrative or somehow a true state of war and, thereby military analysis, with Clausewitz usually pushed to the fore. At times, this approach can lead to the assumption of clear paradigms of capability and strength, and the world operating as if it was an isotropic surface, one that is equal in all parts and, therefore, with key propositions demonstrable by focusing on the central narrative. Van Creveld managed to leave out China, India, Japan, Latin America, and Africa other than as a setting for World War Two.

This approach was, and is, opposite to that of a fitness for purpose, with capability and effectiveness considered accordingly. The latter, however, was/is an appropriate response to a task-based and contextual account of military activity. This approach takes full account of the range of circumstances arising from culturally-specific environments, and the consequent variations in understandings and presentations of victory and defeat, success and failure, suffering and loss, or of definitions, for example of strategy, leadership, morale or technology.

That method is inherently granulated or gritty, rather than smooth; and undermines notions of clear progression,⁶ or, rather, makes them redundant. So also to a degree with the scholarship involved. A granulated approach, moreover, complicates attempts to segregate particular categories or classes of military activity, as well as to have an hierarchy accordingly. Furthermore, as military history should be contextual in examining episodes, for example battles, the account should not solely be with an emphasis on immediate circumstances but yet 'fit for purpose' and 'best practice', separately, have to be read in terms of the specific context, notably the challenge at hand, and not in the light of the apparent wider arc of technological development or military perfectability. 'Fitness for purpose,' and 'best practice' are also rhetorical devices in the continued debate over military practice, and, with it, history.

So also with the organisation of forces. Issues of recruitment, of command, of victory, and of loss, affect the organisation of forces. Their recompense, loyalty, reliability, command and control systems, and ties to society, all vary, as do issues of motivation. It is possible to portray a developmental progression, not least from *ancien régime* (1648-1789), via revolutionary/national/conscript (1792-1866), and mass-reserve (1866-1970), to volunteer-technical (1970-). However, such a model, while valuable, also suffers from conceptual and methodological issues, first, from its concentration on land rather than naval forces, and, secondly from a Westerncentricism that treats Western powers as crucial and argues that other powers feature only if

they replicate Western developments. This is an unhelpful way to cover the period up to 1750 and even 1800, by which time European dominance was still limited in Africa and in East and South Asia, as well as not even being the case, within Europe, in the Balkans.

This approach also omits the extent to which non-European societies have followed different military trajectories in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially if due heed is paid to social and political contexts. Thus, models devised to explain the role of the military in post-1945 Western Europe are unhelpful when it comes to considering (very differently) China or Iraq, Indonesia or Pakistan, Paraguay or Turkey, and so on. Aside from as sources of power, indeed coercion, the military in these states frequently played a far greater role in projects of modernity and modernisation than their counterparts in Europe or the United States. Thus, similar weapons technology, even if employed in a similar fashion, will only explain so much. In terms of conflict, the characteristics of weaponry, whether similar or not, might be useful, even decisive, at the tactical level, but not necessarily at its operational counterpart; and vice versa.

There are modern indicators supporting a granulated approach to force in particular problems, notably in terms of the deficiencies, including serious failures, of great-power expeditionary warfare after World War Two. In one approach, this trajectory represents the failure of one form of 'progressivism,' in the face of another form, in the shape of the doctrine and techniques of insurgency warfare. However, it is more pertinent simply to draw attention to the deficiencies of these very developmental ideas about warfare and to return, instead, to a consideration in terms of specifics. If that undermines the desire to group together in a pattern, that undermining is appropriate.

Fitness for purpose, the theoretical device being deployed here, also helps address a key aspect of present-day military history, that of its global coverage. This global coverage is frequently simplified in terms of a thesis such as the diffusion of a Western practice that is apparently, or allegedly inherently, the best practice. Instead of that approach, there is a need to offer a global coverage by noting the autonomous variety of developments and initiatives and, in particular, the extent to which, as a consequence, Western-derived theories run adrift. This has been demonstrated as specialists in non-Western military history, such as Peter Lorge for China,⁷ employ the concept and vocabulary of military revolution in order to undermine the idea that it describes a Western paradigm and process; although the use of the term itself is a reflection in part of the limited conceptual range, or at least vocabulary, that is available. By stating or implying the possibility of an Eastern paradigm and process, the simple correlation made with reference to the original idea of *a* Military Revolution is rendered highly problematic, which is academic-speak for is shown to be total nonsense.

Westerncentricism in military history can encourage the misleading presentation of imperialism, and indeed waging modern war, as essentially Western, and as imposed on other continents that were inherently peaceful, which is totally mistaken and an aspect of history as serving

polemical purposes. More specifically, the approach can lead to an underplaying of the hybrid character of warfare that was so significant in the success of imperial forces, both Western and other, and also an aspect of the 'ownership' of military development by non-Western as well as Western powers. If the Mughals forged in effect an alliance with the Rajputs, the British in India in the late eighteenth century sought to obtain native alliances in order to secure cavalry, as with the Nizam of Hyderabad against Mysore in the 1790s. Far from this practice being located in some facile developmental model, it can be seen across history, in Antiquity, as with the Persians, Carthaginians and Romans, in the Chinese search for steppe support, and in more recent alliance-practice by states taking part in expeditionary conflict, as in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. This represents a clear overlap between fighting and political 'location,' not least in the shape of 'peace-making.'

A critique from a different direction of Westernisation comes from another instance of the use of evidence. There was in early-modern Christian Europe a large number of publications relating to war. These can be viewed as a key aspect of modernity, and one that indeed differentiated the West; although there were such publications in China and Japan. As an aspect of the role of non-weapons technology, printing certainly transformed the writing about war in Christian Europe from the fifteenth century and, even more, the sixteenth. Books strengthened the consciousness of a specific military tradition, not least as printed manuals, whether on gunnery, tactics, drill, siegecraft or fortification, spread techniques far more rapidly than word of mouth or manuscript. Manuals permitted a degree of standardisation that, arguably over the long term, helped, at least for some powers, to increase military effectiveness, and that was, at any rate, important for cohesion and the utilisation of military resources. More generally, printing and literacy fostered discussion of military organisation and methods, and encouraged a sense of system, affecting and reflecting cultural assumptions. Information can therefore be seen as a key aspect of the shift towards consistency, regularity and uniformity in Western forces, as it encoded these characteristics and replicated them, which was a particular feature of the culture of print. Printing made it possible to disseminate reports, knowledge and opinion, rapidly and at great distance. Contemporary writings on war reflected the sense that not only were there lessons to be learned, but that they needed learning, a situation, inherent anyway to war, that has remained the case since.

Yet, there could be a backward-looking dimension to the world of print, one that reflects the nature of knowledge and verification in the period and also, ironically, the extent to which, drawing on the revolution of the heavenly spheres, *ie* their orbit, the idea of a revolution in this period was that of a return to the starting place, a theme seen in Britain with the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688-9. Philological work and the Printing Revolution were linked to the widespread 'rediscovery,' and availability, in Christian Europe of Classical texts, and this return to the past served to validate new emphases. Rather than seeing this process as past, or even redundant, it is instructive to note the frequency in recent and current discussion of earlier writers, notably Clausewitz, Mahan and Corbett,

but, also, in terms of historiography, of the theorists of the 1970s and 1980s, such as John Keegan and Geoffrey Parker.

In the early-modern West, Classical texts were reprinted, both in the original and in translation, as with Aegidius, Caesar and Vegetius among the reprinting of Classical texts, and there was also current work on the Classical period, as with Jacob von Wallhausen's *La Milice Romane* (1616). Contemporary Western warfare could be understood in part in Classical terms: the Greeks, Macedonians and Romans did not have gunpowder weapons, but their forces did have a mixture of infantry and cavalry, and of cold steel and projectiles. The large-scale use of the pike in many respects represented a revival of the Macedonian phalanx, and could be presented thus. In his *Libro dell' Arte della Guerra* (*Art of War*, 1521), Niccolo Machiavelli tried, with some success, to update Flavius Vegetius' fourth- or fifth-century *Epitoma Rei Militaris* (*On Military Matters*) by focusing on the pike and treating the handgun as similar to missile weaponry.

Both pressure for continuity, and calls for change, were framed in terms of revival and, linked to this, defended by frequent backward-looking reference to the Classics, as with the discussion of fortifications.⁸ This practice continued to be the case, as with the writings of Marshal Saxe in the eighteenth century. The German General Staff preference for a Cannae-type encirclement, one that affected German operational planning in both world wars, can be regarded as another, but different, manifestation of this strong and repeated tendency.

The very presentation of so much material in print was an aspect of change, with entrepreneurial opportunities a particular aspect in (Christian) Europe, and less so in the Orient. The response to the potential of gunpowder was a major aspect of this development in (Christian) Europe, the response including speculation over likely consequences and most appropriate reactions. Yet, again indicating the need for care in the consideration of evidence, the repeated character of much of the discussion poses a question mark against simplistic attempts to discern a 'Military Revolution.' Instead, publications testify to continuities as much as changes, and also to a sense of other practices, notably aristocratic (and non-bureaucratic), heroic command styles. The literature on weaponry and tactics also offered a range of suggestions, and some scarcely matched the revolutionary prospectus offered by the thesis of a Western military revolution, which anyway appears seriously flawed as far as the usage and impact of weaponry as concerned.⁹

An alternative method toward modernity relied on a new form of 'best practice', in the shape of the experimentation of the Western 'Scientific Revolution,' notably with ballistics. For artillery, there was a process of mathematisation through an engagement with ballistics. Theoretical and empirical advances greatly increased the predictive power of ballistics, and helped turn gunnery from a craft into a science that could, and should, be taught. The extent of change in scientific thought, notably physics and mathematics, in a relatively brief period helps explain the value of the term 'the

Scientific Revolution' and, by extension, underlines the limitations of the concept of the 'Military Revolution,' which is employed to describe a far longer period. To take their relationship further, the 'Military Revolution,' as advanced and received as an intellectual concept in the late twentieth century, drew on the example and prestige of the industrial and scientific revolutions.¹⁰

An emphasis on specificities, and on the criticism, even deconstruction, of established theories, raises the 'whither theory?' question, in the shape of, is there more to tell other than 'one war after another'? That is an appropriate point, indeed criticism of an absence of theory, and deserves consideration; but the understandable desire to shape the past and the need to be selective in what is covered, should not be a cover for poor theory, or, at least, of theory understood as a means to an end for research and discussion.

As far as battle was concerned, frequently success was a matter not of weapon usage but of experience, unit cohesion and leadership. The standard focus, moreover, is on an atypical selection of battles, such as Breitenfeld (1631) and Plassey (1757), and, instead, not the more complex range of battles in the Thirty Years' War (1618-48), or in eighteenth-century India, notably the successful invasions of northern India, first, by Nadir Shah of Persia and, then, by Afghan forces, victors at Karnal (1739) and Third Panipat (1761) respectively. These invasions, which, in each case, had significant consequences, demonstrate the problem with the argument that Plassey, and indeed other British victories in India, necessarily define capability, effectiveness and success.¹¹

To further complicate the situation, types of military history other than that of battle can be considered in order to underline the need to engage with very different taskings. Fortifications provides a key instance, and with them, as with other aspects of military strength, there is the need to consider the multiple impact, including in terms of deterrence. There is also the obligation to unpick clear ideas of proficiency. Thus, the composition and use of strength is, in part, a matter of opportunity costs, not least in terms of the very issues of expenditure of manpower, material, and money. This means that proficiency should not be understood in absolute terms, with development assessed accordingly.

There is also, as already indicated, the question of varying tasks. In these cases, and to focus solely on state provision and not, for example, that by drug networks, there are clear differences between what is required for state-to-state provision and what is needed for security against other challenges. The latter include lawlessness, such as piracy, for example from Somalia, and in the Malacca Straits, smuggling, and other forms of illegal activity. Uncontrollable drug operations in Mexico and Honduras are responsible for turf wars, rampant violence, hostage-taking, and the elimination of witnesses. This was particularly apparent in Mexico in late 2019, with the annual death rate by then officially about 31,000 and, in practice, far more. However, the inherent inability of the drug cartels to co-operate lessened their threat to the state, as opposed to its operations.

Returning to Mexico, the frontier wall President Donald Trump proposed was intended for confronting illegal immigration and crime, and for domestic political purposes, rather than serving as a military tool against other states. As such, it is difficult to assess how the wall fits into a Whiggish model. Yet to exclude such works from a consideration of military developments can unreasonably narrow the spectrum of the subject.

More generally, determining what is progressive, if such a concept is to be adopted, requires a sense of the challenges of the present, and also of past and future, and of how these can be related. This sense can be seen in terms of debate over procurement; although procurement means different things to particular groups, and also during specific times. Scarcely a new issue, such debates adopt the language of improvement and improvability; but that is, at once, both analysis and rhetoric, a situation more generally true with military history. Thus, hypersonic missiles may prove ‘magic bullet’ improvements able soon to transform the parameters of force to an hitherto quasi-fictional extent; but they may also prove weapons that are of limited flexibility in terms of options for their use, as well as being expensive to produce, deploy, supply, and replace. So also with the continuing instance of atomic weaponry.

Moreover, all weapons are greatly affected by the development of anti-weapons and anti-tactics, and that process, and the related closure or lessening of capability gaps, again counters ready notions of improvement. This process, seen for example in the twentieth century with aircraft and tanks from the outset, has continued into recent years, as with the successful use of roadside explosives against vehicles and with devices against drones. It is likely that the dropping costs and simplified distribution chains consequent on the 3-D printing of weapons will greatly further these processes.

The weakness and/or closure of capability gaps are such that time is a variable that has to be employed with care when discussing military development, and notably so if granulated analysis is to be preferred to the rhetoric of improvement, whether or not supposedly revolutionary. This situation is likely to continue into the future, and not least because it is far from clear what context the major challenges will emerge from, and, more especially, whether they will be internal or external.

Given this case, it is unclear how a Whiggish account of warfare can be regarded as appropriate. Instead, if ‘Whiggishness’ is at play, it may be, as with the staid account by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), very much a Whiggish work, in terms of the supposed model of the nature of society, and thus possibly be a variant on ‘War and Society’ approaches; although very differently to how they are conventionally approached. Conversely, if the weakness of deterrence and multilateralism in the early 2020s is seen as prefiguring a rise in international tension, conceivably linked to Chinese expansionism, an unsteady American response, and the opportunistic

moves of weaker third parties, then it is possible that the emphasis instead should be on what enhances or lessens capability gaps in state-to-state conflict, encouraging aggression or deterrence.

Thus, the would-be precision that underlies much of the theoretical approach faces problems. So also with the attempt to distinguish between strategy and policy, where, again, there is a degree of Whiggish positivism linked to the idea that the development in the late nineteenth century of a specialist body for the formulation and execution of strategy, in the shape of a general staff, represented progress. In particular this progress was seen as coming from distinguishing strategy from policy, with the latter held, and notably so by commentators close to the military, a group that includes most of those writing on military affairs, to sit in a political context that, allegedly, because of its very political character, was flawed or, at the least, unable to cope with the exigencies of military matters.¹² Strategy, in contrast, was defined as a proper sphere for the military.

In practice, this approach to strategy is problematic in conceptual terms, because the distinction between policy and strategy is not clear-cut; and that is the case in terms of both formulation and execution. The same individuals frequently do both policy and strategy, in so far as they can be differentiated. Any paradigm of best practice, furthermore, was complicated by the extent to which former military officers turned politicians. Moreover, and here the issues of Whiggishness and its use take on an additional perspective, there is (as with weaponry and procurement) the question of particular interests at stake and of their ability to employ arguments to serve their views. In this case, the strategy/policy distinction is in practice very much employed by the military, and notably so in Britain and the United States, in order to provide space for a degree of autonomy from governmental direction, even control, that is lacking in reality in many states, notably China. Circumstances, in addition, vary at every size of state, and the issue is frequently a matter for struggles for control, or, at least, influence, as with the debate over the use of troops against American demonstrators in June 2020.

The confusion over the term strategy¹³ is more generally instructive for the difficulties facing Whiggish accounts. In large part, the evaluation of military history, and notably so for modern military history, is political, not least due to the quest to proclaim messages or lessons, which tends to be more prominent than the effort to learn them, whatever learn means in this context. ‘Messages’ and ‘lessons’ are linked to politics, both outside the military and within it, for the military is an intensely political environment, and with this politicisation generally highly competitive, and so both within and between particular services and specialisations. Thus, in 2020, in Britain, the navy pressed for deterrent action against China whereas from an army perspective that appeared foolish. It would be foolish to neglect the extent to which this situation of partisan ‘ownership’ of views affects, usually greatly so, most writings about military activity, past, present and future, and notably so concerning developments in a long-term context.

Not surprisingly, this point can better be appreciated if the national context of military publication is assessed; a context that is encouraged by linguistic factors as well as the nature of publishing. There might, instead, appear to be a universal language of analysis, if the frequency of references to Clausewitz *et al* is considered; or the spread of the vocabulary of strategy. However, this approach, a classic diffusionist one, and one that is greatly encouraged by military groups that benefit accordingly, notably in procurement, underplays, or generally ignores completely, the extent to which perception, notably at the national level, is important to the reception of these initiatives. In addition, past and present, there are different national traditions, embedded in specific strategic cultures, that are greatly of consequence in framing particular understandings of tasks and concepts, and thereby strategies and histories. Military institution publications, which are inherently national, seek to address the situation.

In all cases, strategy, and thus its historical grounding, overlaps with the politics of policy-making and with the related public politics of contestation. In both, the use of strategy served (and continues to serve) rhetorical and political purposes.¹⁴ Moreover, although generally in different ways, these purposes also affected the use of the term both within the military and among academic commentators.

Strategy thus emerges not as a set of documents, but as a practice in an open-ended field of analysis. It can be approached in terms of what needs to be achieved (the tasks), how this will be done (the ways), and the resources employed (the means). Each affects the others, not only in terms of content, but also of how it is understood, and at every level; and both then and subsequently. The use of individual conflicts as rhetorical and polemical tools, for example ‘World War One,’ or ‘Vietnam,’ or ‘Suez,’ and of particular battles, accordingly, for example ‘the Somme’ or ‘Dresden,’ exemplifies the point about understanding, as also, as with the use of Appeasement.

Linked to this, comes the role of domestic politics in war, notably, in sustaining support. Indeed, in both international and domestic terms, strategies emerge in response to, and in order to forward, coalitions of interest; although the domestic dimension of these coalitions tends to be overlooked or, rather, underrated in much writing on military strategy. The means by which these coalitions are formed and re-formed become relevant to the process by which strategies are advanced, debated, and reformulated. Indeed, the ability to maintain such coalitions is a key element of strategic activity, and a central link between domestic and international politics, and war-making. At the same time, the coalitions of World War Two are very different to those of the twenty-first century. It is not clear that Whiggish concepts and perspectives are valid here, and nor do they really help with the analysis of terrorism or, more specifically, of the ‘War on Terror.’

In terms of conceptualisation, the most helpful are those of incremental change, with innovations adapted to existing structures, and that of fitness for purpose within a context of strategic

cultures; provided no concept is understood in overly proscriptive terms, let alone deterministic ones; while the analytical ‘building blocks’ all have a porous quality. The concept of strategic culture, a term employed to discuss the context within which military tasks are ‘shaped,’ is based on the notion that general beliefs, attitudes, and patterns of behaviour, were, and remain, integral to the politics of power, rather than being dependent on the policy circumstances of a particular conjuncture.

At the same time, the use of this, as of other concepts, has to address specific historical contexts; and doing so underlines the important roles of politics and contingency, again undermining Whiggish approaches. In practice, there are frequently competing strategic visions based on contested notions of the strategic culture, and this contest is linked to debates about taskings, and related issues of doctrine and procurement. The dynamic and contested character of strategic evolution nevertheless includes fundamental changes in the relationships between the constituent parts of the strategic equations of purpose, force, implementation, and effectiveness; and the related debates. The domestic and international contexts vary, as do the means of interpretation.

The problem for the historian remains how best to address the complex interactions of, in particular, change and continuity, structure and conjuncture, the West and the wider world, and to do so to produce an account that is able to identify and probe crucial issues and key questions. The past is not unproblematic. That is certainly true of the trajectory and causation of military development. It is also the case for the priorities, conceptualisation, and methodologies of military history, a subject for which the historiography is underdeveloped compared to most branches of history.

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¹ D. Showalter, ‘Europe’s Way of War, 1815-64,’ in J. Black (ed.), *European Warfare 1815-2000* (Basingstoke, 2002), p. 27.

² *Ibid.*, p. 27. See also J. Black, *Rethinking Military History* (Abingdon, 2004).

³ The change in 2019 in title and coverage from war to violence in the relevant seminar at the University of Exeter is instructive.

⁴ F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l’Époque de Philippe II* (Paris, 1949).

⁵ First edition, London, 2005; second, London, 2019.

⁶ As in D.A. Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon’s Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It* (Boston, Mass., 2007). On which see E.C. Kiesling, “‘Total War, Total Nonsense’ or ‘The Military Historian’s Fetish,’” in M.S. Neiberg (ed.), *Arms and the Man* (Leiden, 2011), pp. 223-27.

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- ⁷ P. Lorge, *The Asian Military Revolution: From Gunpowder to the Bomb* (Cambridge, 2008).
- ⁸ R.T. Vigus, 'The Military Revolution and the Ancient Origins of the *Trace Italienne*,' *Journal of Military History*, 84 (2020), pp. 698-721.
- ⁹ F. Ansani, "'This French artillery is very good and very effective.'" Hypotheses on the Diffusion of a New Military Technology in Renaissance Italy,' *Journal of Military History*, 83 (2019), pp. 347-78, esp. 377-8.
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