

HISTORIES OF WAR

‘The large increase in the number of rifles in the Mullah’s possession and the consequent discard of the spear ... whereas in the past the training of troops in Somaliland could, in the main, be carried out with a view to meeting one form of savage warfare, namely the Dervish rush in bush country, troops must now be trained to readily adapt themselves to a more varied form of fighting which will, in some degree, resemble hill warfare in India.’¹

This British intelligence report of 1919, one that addressed what appeared to be an intractable situation in what was then part of modern Somalia, but which the British claimed as British Somaliland, noted that the past, in the shape of existing training systems, had to be adaptable. Indeed it had to be fed by the new past of a learning from more recent experience. Transferring skills acquired elsewhere, a key military requirement, in this case from World War One, the British succeeded in doing so, applying decisive force in 1920, including successful air attack on the Mullah’s base, to end this resistance.

Thereafter, British Somaliland was secure until rapidly conquered by Italian forces in 1940. This was one of the many campaigns of World War Two, in practice a highly complex struggle, that, however, tend to be ignored and subsumed into the more general narrative. In large part, the rapid fall soon after of Italian East Africa, which included the recapture of British Somaliland, was more consequential, although even that tends to be a forgotten war. And that despite the scale of the conflict there. However, the selection of topics for recollection is one shot through with issues of choice including, in this case, the irrelevance of the Italo-British war in East Africa to the public history of the successor states in the region.

Success today, and in the future, are the prime concerns, indeed commitments, both of the military and of those who comment on war. These are in theory different concerns to much military history. Instead, there is a vast engagement with the latter subject for a number of purposes and across a sphere that reaches from novels to stamps, plays to statues, scholarship to juvenilia, as well as much else. In tone, the range of military history is from the popular to the more judicious, and the partisan to the impartial, not that there is any clear correspondence: instead, there can be a degree of impartial in the more popular, not least in ‘face of battle’ accounts that aim to provide both sides of the story.

In practice, there are many, repeated and often unintentional overlaps between military and public discussion in categories, forums, approaches, intentions and tones. In other words, the culture of the military is not differentiated from a wider military culture. Both are suffused with social values and concerns, and thus draw on popular culture(s) as a whole. This situation can be seen across the range of military concerns, throughout time, and in all states whatever their formal constitution.

Yet, there are also major contrasts in military history between the practical and the popular. In particular, this is so in the case of strategy, most of the writing on which deals with theory that is

intended of value for the military, and is unrelated to popular discussion. The discussion of strategy also presents a distinctive history, with respect to the West, notably in America. Much of this writing is a meditation on the work of Carl von Clausewitz, and, related to that, often a search for alternatives, including, sometimes, the author of whatever is the piece in question. This work has its interest, notably for military politics and intellectual thought, and its value as a source and means of reflection; but the extent to which strategic theory offers much as a guidance to what choices are made by commanders and how they are implemented is problematic. Indeed, as so often with theory, the argument for such influence rests more on assertion than on hard evidence.

The historical significance of these claims varies. That commanders, in the modern age of staff colleges, were lectured to about strategic issues and read theorists does not establish that they were influenced by them. Instead, there could have been ‘confirmation bias,’ in some form or other, both in terms of commanders finding support for what they wanted to do anyway, and because they could believe it appropriate to cite theorists. Such ‘confirmation bias’, we might even say ‘conformation bias’, is also found with commentators, including historians.

Moreover, theorists could seek to argue for their personal influence, as with Basil Liddell Hart and his claims with regard both to German *blitzkrieg* in 1939-41 and to Israeli methods in 1956 and 1967. That, however, did not establish such influence, and indeed there has been considerable scepticism about Liddell Hart’s claims.² This point about the questionable nature of supposed influence is more generally apparent. In the case of Liddell Hart and his more thoughtful contemporary, J.F.C. Fuller, both men also wrote military history. So also with some commanders, notably Field Marshal Montgomery, while it was common for commanders in both world wars to provide justification memoirs that were presented as a form of history.

A key instance of modern military thought and historical commentary, indeed possibly its inherent characteristic, is the argument that capability and effectiveness intrinsically require the active embrace of change. This argument, however, can be seen as inherently problematic, both in terms of the value based on change and with respect to the processes involved in implementing this understanding. The emphasis on change plays a central role in the teleological, indeed Whiggish, assumptions that are so important to military history; for much of the writing is concerned with the search for dynamism, indeed a magic bullet, in the shape of major change and one that other states (indeed civilisations) do not match. Linked to this, comes the questionable assumptions of the existence of a paradigm offered by a supposed model power, for example Spain in late sixteenth century Western Europe, setting the pattern for other states, of a clear hierarchy in military capability, and of an obvious tasking model for the military.

These are in practice convenient but lazy approaches that avoid the real problem of assessing the nature of circumstances, including, of course, change, which is generally far from revolutionary,

however the latter is defined and asserted. The analysis of war in part reflects its definition and classification, and, more particularly, the degree to which, first, war can exist without armed conflict, as in war on want, cancer, et al, and, secondly, the relationship between such armed conflict and what can be seen as illegal activity that may or may not be regarded as war. For example, ‘wars on drugs’ involve fighting but that is usually treated as a form of law enforcement. On the other hand, rebellions or revolts entailed warfare even if the authorities wished to treat them without accepting combatant practices, as, very differently, with slave rebellions³ or terrorist campaigns, such as those of the Provisional IRA in Northern Ireland.

These circumstances provide specific tasks and particular requirements, thus ensuring that change to meet one set may not work well for another. The American military of 1963 was configured for conflict with the Soviet Union, but not for the requirements of war in Vietnam, while the American preparedness for conventional operations that helped lead to the rapid defeat of Iraq in 2003, did not translate to the necessary capability in counter-insurgency operations thereafter, although it is easier to assert a cause-and-effect than to demonstrate one. Indeed, stressing deficiencies in American doctrine may lead to an underrating of the significance of the strength of the opposition, contextual issues, and poor strategy. Each played a major role in the serious difficulties encountered in Iraq and Afghanistan. So also with mismatches for other militaries, indeed possibly inevitably so.

There is, separately, the problem with assuming timeless characteristics, both individual and collective, in conflict. To do so entails underplaying the changing nature of war. The latter is the case both in terms of the phenomenon itself and with reference to explanations of it.

Theory and its influence in the age of staff colleges is one matter, but how about the prior situation? What were the relevant texts or non-textual histories then? Then theory as a defined topic may well have been limited in scope and content, and not least because there was scant use of a vocabulary that approximates to what would later be codified as war or seen as strategy, a point that is even clearer on the global scale. At the same time, as a caveat to this discussion, and that even for recent times, there is no ‘ur’ or fundamental state of, or for, strategy, or indeed war, and thus no one description of either, and that is so whether or not we are considering theory or practice. Instead, there are significant variations, with a variety of factors, contexts and spheres, the words all have differing connotations, at play, some overlapping, including chronological, cultural, religious, political, ideological and service, elements or axes. Vocabulary evades precision and invites qualification, which is an aspect of what should be seen as the inherently subjective nature of military commentary; although most writers do not accept that. Thus, for example, they write of the Western way of war while knowing little or anything about most of the West. This is a common fault that is far from restricted to military historians. So also with the tendency to marginalise or at least underplay naval affairs in many general histories of war.

Indeed, there are more general problems in theorising military history. Illustrating the difficulty of fitting the development of a military technology into a pattern of historical exposition, and the extent to which the latter could take precedence, David Hume, a leading British historian and philosopher as well as a former diplomat, reflected in 1778 on artillery and the conundrums it apparently posed:

‘improvements have been continually making on this furious engine, which, though it seemed contrived for the destruction of mankind, and the overthrow of empires, has in the issue rendered battles less bloody, and has given greater stability to civil societies. Nations, by its means, have been brought more to a level: conquests have become less frequent and rapid: success in war has been reduced nearly to be a matter of calculation: And any nation, overmatched by its enemies, either yields to their demands, or secures itself by alliances against their violence and invasion.’⁴

In the event, Hume was to be proven totally incorrect.

These variations in the meaning, applicability, and usage of categories do not prevent discussion in terms of war, strategy, theory and capability, but they underline how difficult it is to argue with reference to precise categories. Indeed, readers will notice contrasts in content, categorisation and tone in what I write here and more generally. That deliberate approach reflects the correct situation, one that is framed by the specifics of particular military cultures; rather than by the idea of an axiomatic *a priori* set of determining definitions that operate in a diachronic fashion, enabling ready comparisons across time.

The pursuit of such definitions has been one of the major mistakes of part of the literature on war, and, more specifically, of strategic theory. It is more generally symptomatic of a fascination with categories and philosophy, and philosophy of a certain type; rather than, as more appropriate, an acceptance of the porosity of conceptual and practical usage, and even more, categorisation in the past. Thus, for example, rather than a consistent separation and contrast, between the military and policing, there is considerable overlap in practice and indeed discussion.

Indeed, one aspect of engagement with both the laws on war and classic strategic theory is to argue that they tend to do violence to the past by seeking to reduce it to precisions and even quasi-mathematical prediction, including proscriptive rules, whether legal or axiomatic. In contrast, the study of military activity and of strategic practice represents an engagement with the realities of the past in their range, variety, contexts, and conceptual imprecision. It is the very extent of the latter that makes war and strategy workable as concepts, for, if any human phenomenon is handled in too precise a fashion, it becomes of limited value and applicability. This can be seen for example in attempts to establish clear distinctions between war and control, or strategy and policy, or between the strategic and operational dimensions. So also with employing such a pattern of classification-markers in order, for example, to differentiate periods of time, or types of military activity, as with supposed essentials of medieval warfare or naval strategy or insurgency strategy, and so on.

This point can be taken further to consider the looseness of theory and the extent to which in reality it was understood and/or applied in terms of particular circumstances, such that practice created theory, just as perception produced history. That axiom is too pat for this author who emphasises, instead, the contingent, conjunctural and indeterminate. Yet, there is also a point here about the supposed direction of influence from theory to practice, one analogous to other systems of belief and thought. Theory, instead, might have been better understood in terms of the application of example, such that the direction of influence is really from practice to theory. The crucial relevant dataset is not the writings of those seen, notably by themselves, as theorists, but rather the past and the differing ways in which it was perceived. Thus examples from history were repeatedly deployed, whether Alfred von Schlieffen, Chief of the German General Staff from 1891 to 1906, employing Hannibal's crushing victory over the Romans at Cannae in 216 BCE, on which he had published a study, to conceptualise his strategy prior to World War One; or the frequent modern use as mental props of episodes such as 'Munich' or 'Suez,' 'Vietnam' or 'Iraq,' with the usage itself in practice contestable. Both this usage and the controversies are instructive aspects of the histories of war.

In these and other cases, established memories and readings were shaped into military history and, more particularly, what has been termed, for the purpose of analysis, strategic culture, and this shaping and the supposed contents of individual national strategic cultures represents a major form of military history. It is one in which strategic questions, and analyses lend themselves to particular circumstances. The role of history is explained and institutionalised within individual militaries, and often in a contradictory fashion to that of the other combatants. This contradiction underlines the fragility of theory as a method and guide. All too often strategic theory, as well as the synoptic type of long-range military history, operates as a literature that might apparently serve for intellectual disquisition, and therefore offer impartial rationality, but in practice often with a failure to accept its partial and partisan character. So also with the risk that vacuous generalities can preside. Theory pushes against the plausible, as with the thesis of a military revolution that lasts for a quarter-millennium, an analysis that pushes against the understanding of revolution as rapid and abrupt change.

If readings of the past are the most potent aspect of theory, these readings are in practice moulded by the exigencies of military need and strategic practice. Key determinants include whether the power in question is the aggressor or the recipient of attack, and, domestically, whether the perspective is insurrectionary or counter-insurrectionary; although these categories are open to political, and therefore partisan, contention. The latter point needs underlining: despite Clausewitz's assessment of popular resistance to Napoleon, much of the literature of strategic theory follows a classic pattern of focusing on international conflict, but that approach underplays the role of insurgencies. This role in practice was not also more apparent in the conventional theory of

revolutionary movements, including from the Soviet Union in the 1920s, but also more persistently of practice.

Whatever the military task, there are the strategic problems of prioritisation, and the related issues of allocation, both of resources and of precedence in time-sequences of planning and execution. The nature as well as content of planning is a key element of strategic practice and should be one for military history.

Returning to a useful concept, albeit at the risk of giving it too much agency, the role of the past is encoded in strategic culture. This concept can spread to include much of a state's international commitment and social politics, but also needs to encompass the establishment of the parameters, precepts and practices that guide such factors as recruitment, discipline, and attitudes towards casualties. This, however, was not a fixed somehow mechanistic process of optimisation for efficiency and thesis accordingly, nor what can be seen as a 'rational' activity, if, that is, rational is considered in terms of more recent understandings of science.

Indeed, counterweighting what can be presented as a 'rational' pursuit of best practice, there was (and is) the need to adapt the latter, as well as the reality of perceiving best practice, in terms of existing social and cultural norms. As an aspect of this, the totemic character of conflict was to be seen in the determination to hold onto the legacy of the past, of its honour and power. This has been seen across the cultures, from Antiquity to the current day, with military units eager to list past battle honours on their standards and other markers. This is a pattern that continues to the present and one that influences contention over the past, notably battle descriptions.

Giovanni Panini's painting *Alexander the Great at the Tomb of Achilles* (c. 1718-19) depicted the episode in which Alexander, who believed he was descended from Achilles, the Greek hero of the Trojan War, allegedly ordered that the tomb of Achilles in Troad be opened so that he could pay tribute to the great warrior of the past, and thus assert his linkage and acquire his magic. So also with Timur's attempts to claim a descent from Genghis Khan, and thus gain the legitimacy and prestige that were offered. There was a wider meaning in the popularity of images of Alexander's exploits as they came to validate Europeans' sense of their destiny in the world, as in Napoleon's approach to his conquest of Egypt in 1798 or Marzio di Colantonio's painting *Alexander the Great in His Conquest of Asia* (c. 1620). This was an aspect of the *traditio imperii*, the inheritance of Classical imperial power, that was so important in Christendom. Charlemagne had an after-echo comparable to Alexander, although more as a ruler than specifically as a warrior.⁵ Modern counterparts can be considered, as in the subsequent Patton cult.

This process of transferring glory and almost a 'military magic' from the past was more generally significant, for example in China when non-Chinese dynasties were established. Indeed, however much it looked to the future in technology, war was often in the shadow of images of the

past, and the military very willingly so, not least in discussing ideas of leadership. The incorporation of victory was important, being seen for example in naming, as after the victory over Hannibal, the Carthaginian general, at Zama in 202 BCE, with Scipio, the victorious Roman general, thereafter called Africanus. This process of identification, which was commonplace in Classical Rome, extended to religion. Thus, the Emperor Trajan, a warrior emperor, arranged the dedication of his column in Rome in 113 CE for the anniversary of the dedication of the Temple of Mars Ultor in 2 BCE in order to invoke the help of that god in the new war against the Parthian Empire, Rome's formidable rival to the east, and one that when it succumbed did not do so to Roman attack. If Rome is presented in terms of the antecedents of a Western military tradition, this point prefigures the more general relative significance of conflict between non-Western powers.

Acquiring the 'magic' of past leaders was an important aspect of military history and of its public resonance. This 'magic' ranged from specific keys to success, including those of technique, however defined, and more prominently new weapons, to broader ideals of cultural characteristics that would convey triumph if they were heeded. The latter was an argument adopted in Japan in the 1920s and 1930s, and notably by those who placed an anti-technical emphasis on the strength of will. Indeed, histories of war in this sense posed both a caveat on, or affirmation of, the teleology of the future and, conversely, a means to pursue different accounts of military prowess, capability, and the triumph of fortune.

Although much mediated by the use of past sources, which are inevitably selective, and also by that of selected historical works, nevertheless, both the past, and also our accounts, in the present, of the past, is in a perpetual tension. As a branch of history, military history is particularly susceptible to the latter, presentist, approach, and frequently in a somewhat naïve fashion. In large part, this is because of the importance and interest of the subject, which includes immediate practicalities, as well as voluntary consumer interest. Military history was deployed at once as recruiting tools, not only in international conflicts, but also in civil wars such as the American (1861-5) and Spanish ones (1936-9). This was necessary in order to elicit and maintain support, not least if conscription rather than volunteer service made the situation more problematic.⁶

Linked to this, military history is a branch of the subject in which professional academic historians are notably weak. Instead, there are powerful and more numerous cross-currents, especially from writers for an interested public, as well as from those trying to make the subject relevant to the modern military. There are also Social Scientists using military history to support their theories. Some are facile, as in war made the state and the state made war, a longstanding thesis, refreshed by Charles Tilly and frequently repeated since, that ignores the extent to which war and its burdens can weaken or destroy states.

In each case, there is a tendency to ahistoricism. This is especially pronounced when there are efforts to find universal laws for war, and thus lessons, for example on strategy, leadership, or success.⁷ Such works are frequent, as indeed, from the academic community, are collections of essays that are on common topics without sufficient efforts to search for discontinuities in the subject. Some writers have made almost an industry in producing such long-range thematic works.

At the same time, it can be very valuable to consider elements of continuity. A good example is the playing out of male bellicosity and the aggressive competition that was inherent to war, not only its causes, but also its conduct. Male brain chemistry and male bonding both played a major role,⁸ but the understanding and representation of these characteristics have varied greatly across time.

The limitation of assuming common elements without, at the same time, stressing the strong constraints and discontinuities arising from contexts and contingencies, requires continued restating but, nevertheless, is relatively easy to discern. Less so is the related, but different, tendency to adopt a general analytical position that in practice reflects, often very very strongly reflects, the issues and ideas of a particular period. To some extent, such present-mindedness is an inevitable consequence of the way we think and write about history, but the practice also risks imposing a pattern and therefore teleology on the past.

This teleology takes two forms. First, there is an assumption that development toward a certain situation, usually the present, was inevitable, and, secondly, that this was the key theme. Moreover, there is a linked tendency to adopt analytical constructions that arise from this approach, and make apparent sense of it.⁹ The teleology becomes the context with the latter given dynamic force.

The most dominant example in the Western tradition is the idea that, with time, there was a move, indeed development, if not progress, to the 'modern' military and 'modern' warfare; those, crucially, defined in terms of conventional warfare, regular militaries, bureaucratic organisation, technological advance, and industrial capability. In such accounts, the terms modern, industrial, total and conventional, are commonly, indeed insistently, deployed, and often in a loose and even meaningless fashion, albeit with different priorities and varying causal links.

The net effect, however, is the same. It leads to a situation in which history is apparently cumulative and uni-directional, the past is anachronistic, and problems are confronted and overcome by arriving at new solutions. These outcomes, moreover, are understood as new and as solutions, with the automatic implication and/or explicit statement that those who 'clung to the past' were doomed to fail. This is seen for example in discussion about delays in adopting firepower, as with the Mamluks of Egypt and their defeat and total overthrow by the Ottomans in 1516-17. In practice, the key battle reflected rather the absence of cohesion on the Mamluk part.

Whether change is held to have occurred by means of revolutionary processes, or in a more evolutionary fashion (and however, and with whatever qualifications, revolutionary and evolutionary are understood, presented and counterpointed), there is a sense in much of the discussion of the necessity of change. In general, there is a focus on the new, a modernist bias, and an unwarranted credulity with regard to models of progress, notably of the rise of the state, the rise of the West, gunpowder technology, and Western military organisation. Such models certainly make for arresting book titles and for all the clarity of conviction. It generally is not a career-enhancer to argue for the restricted extent and impact of change, or, indeed, the only limited significance of the topic being studied.

The standard approach entails ascribing the priorities of one age, notably that of today, to another age, and in a highly misleading fashion, indeed doubly so for there is generally a simplification of the present. For example, the focus on supposedly decisive battles, a focus which particularly, but not only, characterised commanders and commentators in the nineteenth century, led, when considering earlier periods, to an emphasis on battle, and on commanders who sought it. A classic instance was Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden (r. 1611-32), not least for when he intervened from 1630 in the Thirty Years' War, leading to major battles at Breitenfeld (1631) and Lützen (1632); far less attention was devoted to his earlier campaigning against the Poles.

The commentators' quest for battle generally resulted in a downplaying of other factors, such as sieges, while the element of decisiveness was generally exaggerated. In practice, supposedly decisive battles were frequently more likely to be but another blow in a series of blows (military, political and administrative) to prestige, authority and tax/manpower bases. Moreover, great battlefield commanders could also be unsuccessful in war, as with Hannibal who was eventually defeated strategically by the Romans before he was beaten in battle. Indeed, the emphasis on battle tended to lead to a neglect of strategy, a subject that rarely engaged public interest, certainly in comparison with battle. It was as if the shock of combat combined with the scale of battle drove out other considerations. As a result of the focus on battle, the role of other means of conflict, intimidation and pressure was also underrated. This was true in particular of the small-scale conflict sometimes described as 'small war', conflict that was far more frequent than battles and sieges.¹⁰ So also, in the case of naval battles, of blockade, convoying and privateering.

More generally, and linked to the stress on scale and battle, the standard focus in discussion, both subsequently and at the time, was on symmetrical conflict, rather than on the need for armies to confront other forces, whether conventional or not, that sought to avoid battle. By focusing on such conflict, and on battle, there was an emphasis on particular commanders, strategies, tactics and other factors, rather than an engagement with the range of operations and contexts. This emphasis was mistaken and misleading.

Linked to the focus on conventional operations, there was also an emphasis on state-to-state conflict rather than on civil wars; or only on the latter when, as with the English (1642-6, 1648) and American (1861-5) Civil Wars, they approximated to conventional operations, or with that dimension stressed. This emphasis greatly affected the understanding and presentation of war.¹¹

The standard approach in the literature is readily apparent, but it is far less clear how best to formulate a new approach. This is a significant point because historiography ought to involve pointing the way forward to new challenges, issues, and subjects for research and publication work; rather than solely looking back. The former is certainly more realistic as a reflection of present concerns than the manner in which historiography is often considered by academics. In focusing on the way forward, it can of course be difficult to detect clear schools and developments, not least the military problems that will come to the fore.

Nevertheless, aside from the variety of the histories of war, the existing divided tendencies of military history can each be sketched forward, as well as back. These include, and the tendencies overlap, the technological approach, the 'War and Society' focus, the 'Cultural Turn', the global perspective, and the dominant attention to campaigns and battles. Each, indeed, seeks so to present itself, and, frequently to typecast others, that it is difficult to find much evidence as a result of a coherent subject as a whole, one that can be termed military history. For example, in a criticism of the 'War and Society' focus, Norman Stone commented on the tendency to focus on topics such as 'rape by soldiers, and other patriarchal activities'.¹² In practice, rape is very significant not only to the victims but also as a means of warfare and control, the last a topic stressed in recent work. Nevertheless, Stone captured a lack of sympathy with 'War and Society' approaches that is widespread among many who are interested in the history of war, and notably that of campaigning. How these approaches will develop in the future is unclear. It cannot be said that there is a debate, for to do would be to imply a discussion and mutually-rewarding interaction that is not always obvious.

There is also, very interestingly, the academic literature that seeks to link war to questions of state development and differentiation. This approach goes back to the stadial theories advanced in the eighteenth century as Western commentators then attempted to devise a theory of history in which religion played no real role. This was a theory that did not rely on a providential account of Christian history and purpose and that could readily incorporate non-Western societies. The stadial theories entailed a developmental model that today appears flawed, as well as prejudiced and Eurocentric; although it is not too different from many of the perspectives subsequently advanced by Social Scientists. In the essential argument, economic specialisation led, and leads, to levels of society and related organisation that have governmental and political consequences, as well as affirming and/or encouraging particular social and economic circumstances and trajectories. These all have military consequences, indeed leading to an ability to create, use and deploy resources that offsets the bellicosity of simpler societies in which there is not any equivalent specialisation of labour and,

instead, all men can act as warriors. Ironically, this practice was to prevail for much of the twentieth century, and in the case of societies that saw themselves as modern.

In the eighteenth century, the developmental approach was notably prominent in the West in the writings of Edward Gibbon, William Robertson and Adam Smith, writing that enjoyed a fame that was not restricted to Britain. A similar approach, also rejecting the past, was present in the writings of French *philosophes* and there were other Western counterparts, including in America, as with the views of societies that saw themselves as modern.

In effect, this developmental approach offered historical change itself as strategy with success equated as achieving modernisation; although the extent to which policy was planned was unclear in much of the writing. One of the most significant instances of policy being seen as important came with Gibbon's discussion of Peter I, the Great, of Russia (r. 1689-1725), a warrior-ruler notably successful over Charles XII of Sweden, particularly at the battle of Poltava in 1709 and in the subsequent conquest of Sweden's possessions on the eastern shores of the Baltic. His adoption of Western governmental and military methods was presented by Gibbon as making Russia a successful bulwark against any future irruption of 'barbarians' from the Asian heartland. This approach contrasts with the idea that Russia was a 'barbarian' power, a view widely voiced in Poland and Sweden, and from there, echoed further west.

As tasking, indeed, is a fundamental aspect of military history, so it is necessary to understand its parameters, context, role and dynamics. This process, to a degree, makes military history an aspect of total history, as with Gibbon's assessment of Russia. Rather than this approach risking the loss of the value and distinctiveness of military history, it is more appropriate than treating the subject as a totally different dimension, not least because the wider nature of conflict is thereby captured. Yet, an easy stress on tasking can risk underplaying the extent to which it is often 'constructed' in the light of hindsight. Moreover, there is the tension between tasking as explicit or implicit, and, linked to this, between a 'natural' product of context and circumstances or the result of choices.

Linked to tasking, the very nature of the present, whether military, geopolitical and/or ideological, always remains up for contention; and this is even more so for speculation about the future. Each, in practice, moreover, contributes to debate about the past. Teleological accounts of change should be seen as an aspect of this contention, rather than as an apparently immutable proof, one that is subject to analysis, but that allegedly remains a building block of the subject. This is a point that is often lost in the assertions about military change and modernisation. These are part of the rhetoric of war, a rhetoric seen in contemporary debates and also in subsequent historical ones.

Histories of war inherently tend to focus on outcomes, the majority making them desirable or at least likely, and, in general, seek to make these outcomes appear valorous. Depending on the cultural and ideological perspective, these outcomes can be presented as inevitable or not, but

generally are seen as providential, however much that is expressed in religious terms. That then poses pressures for a given narrative depending on whether the conflicts are international or domestic, and whether the combatants are presented as states, dynasties, nations, countries, religions, ethnicities, or social groups.

In turn, however, these analyses and categories could be contested at the time and now. Thus, in imperial terms, Chinese writers sought the *tat'ung* or great harmony/unity, whereas, in the West, there was both this, and an interest in the balance of power, however fluctuating the latter might be. Any history or policy predicated on the desirability of the balance of power generally offered a different rationale to that of imperial expansions for the balance represented an emphasis on restraint.

Teleology is so tempting and commonplace in military history understood as a general process, rather than as simply the narration of specific battles, in part because of the apparent objectivity of technological progress. But in reality there is no such objectivity for technological progress, as it involves costs, priorities and trade-offs that entail perception and politics. There is no clearcut objectivity. Furthermore, if the emphasis for military capability, instead, is placed on administrative sophistication and, more generally, on the nature of the state, then the course of military history in essence also becomes from this perspective an aspect of general history.

As a related point, competing powers are rival systems; consequently, the potential for conflict and the impact of war are each strongly mediated by pre-existing structures, both administrative and social. This then leads to a wider-ranging enquiry about the character of societies and their cultures. However effective a given state might be in raising resources, that does not explain the degree to which its people are willing to accept deprivation and risk death for its ends. Indeed, underlining the ambiguous relationship of states and war, the raising of resources may weaken this given state politically and damage it in both economic and social terms.

Yet, as a variant on divine favour and superior skill and/or will, a belief in technological potency and, separately, military professionalism is convenient for societies that cannot introduce, retain or match the mass mobilisation and ideological and social militarism of rivals; a trope seen from Antiquity to the present. However, the progressive evolution of superior military systems and, additionally or alternatively, economic development that are discerned by some in a quasi-automatic mechanistic fashion needs to be qualified by an understanding of the roles of fashion, ideology, prejudice and social patterns.

Another aspect of categorisation, and, with it, explicit or implied analysis, is provided by time. Indeed, a key device in histories of war is that of periodisation; but it is also a source of contention as well, separately, of confusion. In particular, aside from the values to be placed on particular divides and periods, is the past (or any particular period of the past) different, such that attempts to find some fundamental criteria or state that does not change across time is misleading.?

Such an attempt of course has frequently been made. It can be found in terms of arguments in favour of lasting rules of war and thereby relevant lessons. There are also alleged continuities in terms of the experience of battle, otherwise known as the face of battle. Furthermore, the religious analogy of the struggle between good and evil provided a metaphysical guide to the apparently lasting character of war in what was, for most cultures, its elemental form, with this metaphysics of conflict still on offer today, and in both religious and secular societies.

As against these approaches for and from continuity comes the emphasis on change. Change is description, analysis, explanation and rhetoric; and also covers many facets in military history, not only changing circumstances but also key contextual elements, notably altering practices of thought and, also, different categorisations. The latter provide an instructive basis for variations in the periodisation adopted, for example by an 'Age of Cavalry.' There are two prominent forms of periodisation. The first entails a period of time, such as the nineteenth century. The second focuses, instead, on different stages along a continuum based essentially on one criteria, for example firepower. Complicating such periodisation, as well as existing narratives and analyses of change, there are also newly prominent concerns as applied to war, for example environmentalism.¹³

Advocates of technologically-defined military transformation, or just change, however, tend to ignore the diversity of circumstances across the world, in favour, instead, of a presentation of the world as, in effect, an isotropic surface, uniform in all parts, both geographically and chronologically. Such an assessment, in practice, is naïve, both militarily and politically. Although not dependent on this point, this naïvety in many circumstances draws on histories of war predicated on technological superiority. These not only misrepresent the recurrent, indeed inherent, contingencies of past success and the dependence on multiple factors, but also capture the failure to engage with ensuring that victory is confirmed in terms of compliance. The last is crucial to the extent and nature of success.

Yet, to treat these or any histories as technical or value-free discussions of capability and effectiveness as if part of an abstract discussion is to ignore the psychological factors that are crucially important to the production and reception of histories of war. This is far more so than for example of geographies of war. The need for a belief in superiority is an important element in discussing and explaining conflict. It provides justification and explanation, and, in a crucial addition, also structures narrative and analysis, both explicitly and implicitly.

A belief in superiority in technological terms meets the ideological and imaginative demands of modern industrial society, and does so to the benefit of particular civilisational modes and moods, and individual states and peoples. America has been the most prominent site and beneficiary of this approach, not least as the state that invented and then dominated air power, before moving on to do the same with the nuclear age. A role as inventor and imitator obviously encourages interest in change. The same is very much affecting Chinese attitudes as well, not least because Communism

presents itself as scientific and future-facing, while the leadership of China overwhelmingly has an engineering training.

From a very different perspective, there is a determination to use technology to overcome the multiple constraints of military operations, and that determination encourages an emphasis on its value. This approach to technology as the necessary or at least desirable answer can however lead to the mistake that overcoming constraints equates with abolishing risk, which is not the case as it is not possible to achieve the latter. The contrasting ways in which technology can be approached indicate the need to approach categories with care. So also with the use of the circumstances and requirements of hindsight to determine which technological developments were of particular relevance and importance in the past.

Military history, indeed, is an obvious field in which it is dangerous to adopt the perspective of hindsight. Linked to this, both staff-rides, an established form of training in which the battlefield is viewed, and war-gamers devote time to an entirely reasonable pastime, asking whether battles, campaigns and conflicts could have had different results. This practice can be pursued at tactical, operational and strategic levels.

The role of chance and contingent factors appears crucial when explaining not only particular engagements and campaigns, but also wars as a whole. At the same time, the counterfactualism of hindsight overlaps with that of contemporary reportage. The latter could be very insistent in its conclusions, as in 1782 when Major-General Sir John Burgoyne (who had been totally defeated by the Americans at Saratoga in 1777) commented on the French capture of the Sri Lankan port of Trincomalee, which Britain had earlier seized from the Dutch: 'I really believe the fate of the whole Carnatic [south-east India] to be involved in the loss of it. Had this remained in our possession, with such a fleet as the Admiral Hughes now has, we could have had nothing to fear.'¹⁴ From the impressive protected anchorage at Trincomalee, ships could readily sail to the Carnatic. Counterfactualism in many respects recovers the uncertainties of the past. It was much in evidence in 2022-23 during the Ukraine war, and is frequently advanced for other possible conflicts such as an Israeli air attack on Iran or a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

Contemporary reportage was in part a matter of journalism but, more significantly for military development, of the relevant official processes of war, from immediate unit accounts to after-action reports, and also those of foreign observers. These processes could differ in their emphases or even conclusions, but combined to provide rapid histories. In turn, these contributed to the official histories that were to follow. That, however, were not their purpose. This is an instance of the more general situation of unalignment in history, notably the use of sources for purposes for which they were not intended.

More profoundly, there are readings by historians and other commentators between sources, attitudes, assumptions, circumstances and contexts that reflect links, causal and otherwise, resting on belief and assertion. This situation is present across history, and, indeed, perception and reasoning; but there should be no more of an acceptance of this slippage in some cases than in others. Histories of war tend to be particularly susceptible to this practice of assertion, rather, instead, than showing the necessity of the conditional nature of assessments, both sources and analyses. In part, this failure of analysis is because wars always play a role in public memory. They can be recycled by means of being relocated for new lessons. That is the case for oral societies and their folk memory, but also can be seen in the recent and contemporary use of wars in order to advance and interpret possibilities, threats and experiences.

A sceptical introduction to some of the issues involved in histories of war might conclude by arguing the inherent need for decentring any particular perspective. However much it is tempting to offer a panoptic survey as if providing Olympian detachment and an oracular judgment refracted through perfect knowledge, such an approach is philosophically bogus, conceptually naïve, and methodologically misplaced. Thus, the historian as observer may note parallels, in for example East Asia and Europe, for example Han China and the Roman Empire, but there is a need for great caution in reifying these into an explanatory device. Moreover, the deployment of parallels is apt to be self-fulfilling in its selective use of evidence.

Readers may not expect nor wish to be served caution, let alone doubt. Yet, the multitudes who have served and will do so, deserve better treatment than to be employed to substantiate the platitudes so regularly deployed in discussion. By their very nature, conflicts are individual and specific, and the reasons for outcomes should be expressed with qualification, indeed scepticism. That this admonition does not capture standard usage helps make the situation more interesting and instructive, for histories of war express the need to advance particular agendas, whether national, social, cultural, intellectual, service or personal. Due recognition of this situation and an exploration of its consequences would contribute greatly to the subject.

¹ LH. Ismay 3/1/1-83, quotes pp. 55, 58.

² A. Searle, 'A very special relationship: Basil Liddell Hart, Wehrmacht generals and the debate on West German rearmament, 1945-1953,' *War in History*, 5 (1998), pp. 327-57.

³ M. Barcia, *West African Warfare in Bahia and Cuba: Soldier Slaves in the Atlantic World, 1807-1844* (Oxford, 2014).

⁴ D. Hume, *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688* (6 vols, London, 1778), II, 230.

⁵ M. Gabriele, *An Empire of Memory: The Legend of Charlemagne, the Franks, and Jerusalem before the First Crusade* (Oxford, 2011).

⁶ J. Matthews, *Reluctant Warriors: Republic Popular Army and Nationalist Army Conscripts in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Oxford, 2012).

⁷ See, for example, C.S. Gray, *Strategy and Defence Planning. Meeting the Challenge of Uncertainty* (Oxford, 2014).

⁸ G. Hanlon, *Italy 1636: Cemetery of Armies* (Oxford, 2016).

⁹ K. Helleiner, 'The Vital Revolution Reconsidered,' *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 23 (1957), p. 1.

¹⁰ G. Satterfield, *Princes, Posts and Partisans. The Army of Louis XIV and Partisan Warfare in the Netherlands, 1673-1678* (Leiden, 2003).

¹¹ For a different focus, D. Armitage, *Civil War: A History in Ideas* (New York, 2016).

¹² Stone to Black, email, 29 April 2015.

¹³ J. Browning and T. Silver, *An Environmental History of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2020).

¹⁴ Burgoyne to Earl of Shelburne, 1 Nov. 1782, BL., Shelburne papers, vol. 37.