# Some Thoughts on the Utilization of the Past in the Military

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This article addresses the question of whether military organizations fully exploit the benefits of employing academically trained historians and, as a consequence, discusses the way the military treats the past. Do military organizations still predominantly treat the past as a mirror of the present—a pool of easily accessible knowledge from which to draw clear-cut lessons—as they have for most of recorded history? What exactly do they hope to learn from studying the past? Do the military's expectations match well with what professional historians can offer since they usually have been taught to question the idea that the past can offer unambiguous guidance and are accustomed to the idea of academic freedom? Are there ways to optimize the utilization of the past?

As it is nigh impossible to discuss all military history in all countries, the article concentrates on Western writing of military history and Western ideas on the relation between the military profession and its history. After all, one may argue that the Western "army model" has become dominant across the globe. The same applies for academic standards. The analysis presented here, therefore, will be relevant to anyone who hopes to learn from the past.

## Uses of History in the Military

For most of recorded time, philosophers, historians, and soldiers have argued that history is an important source of practical knowledge and lessons, either for the conduct of campaigns or for the nature of humankind.[1] Although past experience *does* provide useful knowledge, examples of slavish imitation and blind veneration of tradition abound. In 1926 British major general and prominent military theorist J. F. C. Fuller (1878–1966) argued that by obstinately clinging to tradi-

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tion, officers deprived themselves of a tool to make sense of the complexities of warfare, which had resulted in the carnage of the Great War. A critical, scientific study of past wars would have revealed the nature of the phenomenon of warfare and its likely shape in the future.[2] Fuller is far from the only writer to criticize the military's approach to the past. Such criticism is implicit in the oft-quoted commonplace that the military always prepares for the previous war in order to fight the next one.[3]

During the twentieth century, the importance that military organizations accorded to the past has had its ups and downs. In spite of Fuller's vitriolic comments, armed forces were seen increasingly as a huge company that could be managed much the same way as, let's say, a car factory. That is, all actions and processes were broken down into a sequence of smaller, ever-repeatable acts that conformed to a fixed pattern.[4] During the Cold War, many individuals believed that the past could offer no guidance since at no previous time did the future of mankind seem to depend on a single decision. After America's defeat in Vietnam and following the Israeli-Arab wars, interest in the past rose markedly, to the point that one could speak of a comeback although military history never regained its pre-1914 dominance.

Even so, Fuller's criticism remains relevant. Whatever the dominant ideas on the utility of the past, the military never stopped producing doctrines and prescripts essentially based on past examples (i.e., on military history). One studies earlier battles and campaigns because they offer an armchair version of military exercises and partially remedy a lack of personal experience in war.[5] Since warfare is the most confusing, chaotic, and stressful activity in which humans engage, an enhanced understanding of this activity would enable commanders and units to perform better in terms of effectiveness and force protection. Military organizations study the past in the hope of finding tools for understanding war and preparing commanders and units for it. This interest primarily concerns principles of war, best practices, and unit cohesion.

The idea that principles of war exist originated in the eighteenth century CE and underpinned the foundation of military schools and academies, as well as the development of general staffs. That is, one assumed that the systematic and rational study of campaigns led to an understanding of the nature of war that the military could successfully apply in battle. Adhering to these principles would bring about victory. Once identified, they also found their way into military doctrine, which translated them into practical prescripts for action. This approach, epitomized by Swiss theorist Antoine-Henri de Jomini (1779–1869), remained paramount until well after World War 2.[6]

In line with the age-old idea that studying "great captains" would produce great captains, there is considerable interest in "lessons learned" and "best practices." General staffs engage in such endeavors; units must produce after-action reports; military academies and operational units conduct staff rides to obtain insights into the importance of terrain, geography, and leadership; and so forth. The military believes that the past offers clear examples of dos and don'ts that can be internalized and incorporated into training programs.

Additionally, history (dubbed "tradition") is considered a vital element in unit cohesion, an indispensable quality in battle effectiveness. Units bear historic appellations and have banners that show the names of historic battles in which the unit participated. These banners are displayed during parades and ceremonies, instilling pride. They suggest that the present unit is identical to the one which fought that particular heroic battle. Oftentimes, historical truth is subordinate to this notion. After World War 2, for instance, when the Netherlands had to rebuild its army from scratch, a ministerial decree held that new units "continued" the traditions of the old prewar ones dissolved by the German occupiers. Thus, today, Dutch army units date back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[7]

## Fundamentals of the Historical Discipline

The Jominian approach to the past described above is at odds with the fundamental convictions of academically trained historians who, as part of a professionalization impetus in the last decades, have entered the service of Western military organizations to teach and research military history and strategy. Even though this "civilianization" was hardly the "unprecedented disaster" that some old drum-and-trumpet military historians and soldiers believed it to be, an unexpected problem arose—the utility of the past came under question.[8] Reasons of space do not permit a discussion of the theories behind the convictions of academically trained historians. Nonetheless the subject is too important to gloss it over completely. The questions of how to establish what actually happened in the past, how we know it happened, what meaning we should attach to it, and how we know we are right are fundamental because they pertain directly to the value of military history to the military.

Most but by no means all of the academically trained military historians would argue that their research methods allow for a fairly accurate *reconstruction* of past events, not of the past as such—certainly too daunting a task. Professional historians in other historical subdisciplines usually prefer the view that historical inquiry can provide only a *construction*—the relation between events in the past is not part of that same past but the product of the informed imagination of the

historian. Academically trained military historians would agree to a certain point: causal relations between events are real but do not conform to preexisting "laws." They also would hesitate to suggest future developments on the basis of past events. As a consequence, they take issue with the belief that "immutable principles" exist. The past doesn't repeat itself.

Generally, historians also reject the idea that it is possible to distill clear-cut lessons from the past. What we know about the past is based on sources that do not simply list all that happened. Instead, they are rife with conjecture, interpretations, (un)intentional simplifications, and hidden agendas. Historians, nonetheless, must base their accounts on those sources since they have nothing else to go by. Additionally, many events either lack trustworthy sources or enjoy a surplus so large that it inhibits thorough study. Any "lesson" drawn is therefore a construct rather than something that the past unmistakably offers. Lastly, while acknowledging that traditions may prove useful in cementing a sense of shared destiny, historians consider the way the military conceives "traditions" as outright folklore and myth.

In short, according to academics, the value and utility of the past to the present do not lie in traditions, lessons, or immutable principles but in the fact that it is *different*. In this view, understanding just how it differs promotes a deeper understanding of both past and present because it challenges assumptions and ingrained beliefs. Studying the past involves change rather than continuity and coping with uncertainty rather than establishing eternal truths.

This approach to the past resembles the one developed by Prussian general and theorist Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831), which, in turn, had much in common with the methods preached by his near contemporary and conational Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), one of the founding fathers of the academic discipline of history.[9] Like his contemporaries, Clausewitz strongly believed that one could learn from the past, but, unlike them, he was interested in the *nature of war* rather than in practical prescripts. Clausewitz held that one could understand war by meticulously studying a single, particular phenomenon.[10] The likes of Jomini, however, tended to heap together various cases and impose their own models upon them. In Clausewitz's view, war is always a political instrument, but the shape it takes is determined by the interplay among rational choice, irrational factors such as hatred and the use of violence, and chance. This interplay, which exists in each warring side and, of course, in the exchanges on the battlefield, is different in each era.

## Not *What to Think* but *How to Think*

Clausewitz's premature death and the complexity of his analysis precluded a large following during his lifetime. Recommended by Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, Clausewitz enjoyed a surge in popularity in the late nineteenth century. Although most armed forces today pay lip service to Clausewitz, the Jominian model with its focus on principles, lessons, and best practices has remained pre-eminent.[11]

In their belief in immutable principles, military organizations are prone to project historical phenomena both forward and backward. They hold that history repeats itself, if not literally, because human nature does not change.[12] Even military theorist Basil Liddell Hart (1895–1970), who often has much useful to say, took some pride in working according to this procedure.[13] This practice is at odds with the idea of constant change prevalent among professional academic historians.

Consequently, important questions (e.g., to what extent accounts of past battles are truthful reflections of what actually happened and the problem of establishing causal relations between events) more often than not are passed over. Thus, failure in battle is attributed primarily to ignoring the principles or not drawing the "correct" lessons. But what lessons can be learned when the information is incorrect or biased or when conclusions are actually much less firm than presented?

This situation is aggravated by the fact that writers who lack academic training still produce most military history and cannot be bothered by such questions. They seek to glorify and to warn or rehabilitate, much less to understand. This may lead to grotesque distortions of reality such as books that framed the crushing defeat of the Netherlands at the hand of the Germans in 1940 as a contribution to Allied victory.[14] Further, compare recent discussions on the professional networking website LinkedIn about which British or Commonwealth unit was the most gallant. But how could we compare, say, Waterloo, Vimy Ridge, and El Alamein? The net result of the fact that there are many varieties on offer implies that the military can choose the history of its liking. It might well choose to pass by the brand written by academically trained historians as it is the least useful to the military when it comes to distilling practical lessons—that commodity which military organizations crave most. Historians cannot teach practical lessons, provide clear solutions for problems in the present, or predict. We are no prophets.[15]

Actually passing by academically trained historians would be counterproductive to say the least. Precisely because they are sensitive to methodological problems and question the existence of immutable principles, such historians

produce (re)constructions that take into account the fact that we cannot always establish with certainty what really happened. As such they are equipped to help the armed forces prepare for the uncertainties of the battlefield. We cannot offer best practices or prove the existence of eternal principles, but we can offer something more valuable: an idea of the complexity, chaos, and untidiness of war. We can show how and why decisions were made, both rationally and intuitively. Many, if not most, acts and decisions in war come about in a mixture of rational deliberation and intuition—even impulse—regardless of the official view that commanders make decisions rationally. For instance, the ability to intuitively "read" a battlefield or a situation is a vital asset for commanders at every level. To ignore irrational and intuitive elements, friction and chance, would reduce war to something that it is not—a game of chess in which generals move pawns at will. Rather it is a manifestation of the interplay among chance and rational as well as irrational, even subconscious, factors. We may also identify underlying patterns of thought ("military culture") that influenced them, and we can show the actual outcome of those decisions. In so doing, we may be able to instill an intuitive understanding of what war is all about and what cadets and midshipmen may expect. Such knowledge does not arise from a quick run-through of a few pages in a textbook but from hard thinking and would fit in the current philosophy of many military academies in the West tasked with training "thinking soldiers."[16] Apart from stimulating cultural awareness, an understanding of the complexity and unpredictability of warfare will hopefully encourage junior officers to think critically, ask the right questions, and perform a crucial role as advisers to their commanding officers.

Contrastingly, in their (understandable) quest for certainty, military organizations that turn to the other varieties of military history may unknowingly spread half-truths and myths which impair proper understanding of the dynamics of war and may inhibit rather than improve the armed forces' performance on the battlefield. Academically trained historians, therefore, have a vital role to perform in the training of officers and in the evaluation of military operations.

To capitalize on these benefits, though, one must meet an important precondition. If historians are to truly contribute to an improved battlefield performance, they need access to all of the material pertaining to a particular event. Only then can they establish what actually happened. This is desirable not simply from a scholarly perspective. If the military wishes to learn from abysmal failures, then covering them up, distorting them, or downplaying their importance surely is not the best way to proceed. The only possible way to learn and prevent their recurrence is to involve professionals specifically trained to conduct research. They may include not only historians but also people from other disciplines. It is important,

however, that they study the past for what it is—not for what it should have been. Accessing the magisterial potential of past battles and operations occurs only when historians are free to analyze all of the sources. Studying the past in a truthful manner is difficult enough with an abundance of sources; withholding access to them makes it even more difficult. The resulting picture will be distorted and biased, effectively destroying the possibility of learning from the past. Equally important, researchers must be free to select their own subject and case studies and have access to facilities for a free discussion about their findings. Although military authorities may think differently, this is not just a scholarly interest. As Liddell Hart wrote, "Camouflaged history not only conceals faults and deficiencies that could otherwise be remedied, but engenders false confidence—and false confidence underlies most of the failures that military history records. It is the dry rot of armies."[17]

## Constraints

Even if military organizations fully shared this view (as yet, they do not), military historians working *within* military organizations will always encounter a number of limitations to the topics they can address. Four come to mind. First, whatever the official position on academic freedom, tension exists between official spokespersons and academics in the military. The former are employed to inform the public, explain a certain course of action, and limit political damage resulting from it. Historical research may produce unsettling results that potentially affect the position of the minister.

Second, because historians working for the military will be either civil servants or professional soldiers, they must swear an oath of allegiance, in most cases to the constitution. The oath obligates them not to disclose secrets, among other things. However, what constitutes a secret is not for historians to decide. Abysmal failure is often a cause for censorship. The actual limiting effects of the oath depend upon the political system and situation of a particular country. Conceivably, its impact may be alleviated by some sort of negotiation: historians working for the military may study all of the relevant documents but not refer to them directly, and they must submit their publication for approval. Such requirements, however, might very well prompt the question to what extent such publications may still be considered academic since any debate on them will be hampered by the fact that access to the sources is restricted to historians working for the military. For the military itself, such "camouflaged" material would (or should) prove equally problematic.

A third limitation, the security of ongoing operations, is a legitimate concern, and historians working for the military would generally accept this restriction. But authorities may invoke the argument of security at will, and military-employed historians are hardly in a position to challenge them successfully. Apart from security reasons, methodological considerations present themselves. Although the argument that camouflaged history "is the dry rot of armies," of course, remains valid for ongoing operations, military-employed historians generally refrain from publicly commenting on such operations.[18]

The last limitation, which differs somewhat from the others, may also be found in civilian universities: the need to be "relevant," which may slowly erode academic freedom in the military. Of course, researchers working with the military will have to address subjects relevant to the institution, but how does one establish military relevance? This situation is aggravated by the fact that bureaucratic organizations are inclined to respond to actual needs and that they demand quick answers. More often than not, solving field problems in the ongoing operation is the only concern for the military—and even for its long-term planners. For researchers working for the military, however, this may pose a problem since research programs are financed on the basis of "relevance," so they are expected to concentrate on such field problems. Proper (historical) research usually takes time; therefore, upon its completion, another field problem requiring a "relevant" solution may have arisen. The criterion of relevance is also problematic since it assumes that the outcome of a given research project can be known beforehand. Oftentimes, however, the unexpected outcomes have proven most relevant.[19]

## A Code of Ethics

These four types of tension cannot be solved, at least not permanently, but one can alleviate them. Potentially, the most effective way involves tapping into the military's interest in learning because we can be sure that whatever there is to learn from the past suffers from the impediments described above. To instill such an understanding would require a sustained effort on the part of professional historians to clarify what they can and cannot provide.

Part of this effort to enhance their "utility" would entail adopting and then invoking a code that sets professional standards. This may even be the case when a legal or political guarantee of academic freedom applies. Their added value lies in the fact that historians can present military organizations with an explicit formulation of the academic foundations of their profession. Since these codes also list obligations, such as the one to report their findings truthfully and the one to

do proper heuristics, military organizations can ascertain the standards that historians are to uphold.

Because military organizations care for their public image, a situation in which the output of scholars in their service is markedly less, qualitatively, than the academic standards may be a cause for (some) concern. As such, it may give historians some breathing and negotiating space. Many Western military organizations—and probably a few others too—subscribe to the idea of accountability. This primarily means accountability towards society that funds it, but it also includes the willingness to account for past actions. Enter the historian.

Additionally, an ethical code may be of service to both historians and their employer by offering a litmus test of quality and acting as a moral compass in the negotiation process between military historians and the military. It supplies the bandwidth for these negotiations and may carry home the idea that historical reality itself is nonnegotiable. Even so, military historians are not the equals of the military. As civil servants or members of the military hierarchy, they may question the judgment of their employer and try to increase their leeway. In the end, though, it all comes down to the willingness of this employer to learn from or account for its acts. If this is fundamentally absent, then an ethical code or a right to know can do hardly anything.

## Conclusion

Some 50 years ago, eminent military historian Michael Howard summarized the relevance of military history to the military profession, noting that it would make "both professions wiser forever."[20] His remark went against the military and academic grain since he was speaking at a moment when the relevance of the past seemed very much in doubt. Its magisterial potential had been questioned, and most military history writing remained below academic standards. Since then, much has changed; among other things, the concept of the thinking soldier has inspired a reappraisal of military history. In several military organizations, the magisterial potential of the past is no longer sought in *what* to think but in *how* to think.

Nonetheless, military historians face legal, institutional, political, and security-related limitations that affect the way they work. These limitations occur everywhere, albeit in different shapes and with different effects. In accountability-minded organizations, military historians are in a much better position than their colleagues in an inward-looking organization. The irony, of course, is that by placing limitations on their historians, military organizations may very well erode the authoritative potential of the past they hope to tap into. There is nothing to learn

from intentionally distorted accounts. Only full access to the sources (both documentary and living) and freedom to discuss them, as well as to write and disseminate their findings, will enable military historians to complete sound research and produce insights that will contribute to the improvement of the military's performance.

At the same time, it is clear that such an ideal situation will rarely materialize. The actual leeway that historians will acquire depends upon the outcome of a negotiation process of sorts. In this process, historians may profit from the codes of ethics that several of their colleagues in civilian institutions have adopted because they establish clear academic standards that should be upheld. Failure to attain those standards may contribute (or even lead) to battlefield failure and will diminish the standing of the military. In the end, although this nonarmed struggle may prove hard and long drawn, it is one that must be fought. It is the only way to make both professions wiser forever.

**Notes**

1. Cf. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* (London: J. M. Dent, 1910), bk. 1, chap. 22, sec. 4; and Plutarch, *The Life of Alexander* (New York: Random House, 2004), sec. 8.1. On Maurice of Nassau, another prime example, see Gerhard Oestreich, "Der Römische Stoizismus und die Oranische Heeresreform," *Historische Zeitschrift* 176 (1953): 17–43. See also Petra H. M. Groen, ed., *De tachtigjarige oorlog: Van opstand naar geregelde oorlog*, *1568–1648* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2013).

2. J. F. C. Fuller, *The Foundations of the Science of War* (London: Hutchinson, 1926).

3. Reality is rather more complex than that. Compare the ways the Germans, British, and French reassessed their World War One experience. Williamson Murray, "Thoughts on Military History and the Profession of Arms," in *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession*, ed. Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 78–94.

4. Eric Sibul, "Military History in Professional Military Education to Prepare for a Complex and Dangerous World" (paper presented at the International Society of Military Sciences conference, Amsterdam, 26 November 2009); and Richard Hart Sinnreich, "Awkward Partners: Military History and American Military Education," in Murray and Sinnreich, *Past as Prologue*, 55–77.

5. Murray, "Thoughts on Military History," 87–88; and Michael Howard, "The Uses and Abuses of Military History," *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* 107 (February 1962): 4–10.

6. Stephen Morillo with Michael F. Pavkovic, *What Is Military History?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2006), 29–36. Cf. Peter Paret, ed., with the collaboration of Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert, *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 143ff.

7. Dutch standing order 1946, no. 286; and ministerial decree, 19 August 1946, MK-B II, no. 917.

8. Allan R. Millet, "American Military History: Clio and Mars as 'Pards,'" in *Military History and the Military Profession*, ed. David A. Charters, Marc Milner, and J. Brent Wilson (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992), 14.

9. Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State: The Man, His Theories, and His Times*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), xv.

10. Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege* (Berlin: Dümmlers Verlag, 1832–35), II, 6, 91.

11. See, for instance, Christopher Bassford, *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America, 1815–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, eds., *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007).

12. W. C. Fuller Jr., "What Is a Military Lesson?," in *Strategic Studies: A Reader*, ed. Thomas G. Mahnken and Joseph A. Maiolo (London: Routledge, 2008), 34–50.

13. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Why Don't We Learn from History?*, rev. and expanded ed. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972), 16.

14. This is expressed in the series of works by retired Dutch lieutenant colonel E. H. Brongers. For a scholarly analysis of the same war, see Herman Amersfoort and Piet Kamphuis, eds., *May 1940: The Battle for the Netherlands* (Leyden: Brill, 2010). For a typology of the current varieties of military history, see Morillo and Pavkovic, *What Is Military History?*; and Millet, "American Military History."

15. Cf. Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 8; and Fuller, "What Is a Military Lesson?"

16. Charles C. Krulak, "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War," *Marines Magazine*, January 1999, http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/strategic_corporal.htm; and Maj Lynda Liddy, "The Strategic Corporal: Some Requirements in Training and Education," *Australian Army Journal* 2, no. 2 (Autumn 2005): 139–48.

17. Liddell Hart, *Why Don't We Learn?*, 27.

18. They might of course resort to the Chatham House Rules: speaker and audience agree that the speaker will share sensitive information on the condition that this information will not be referred to directly in public and that the identity of the source will be not be disclosed.

19. Unintentional discoveries include penicillin, radioactivity, and phosphorus. On these, see Ola Olsson, "Why Does Technology Advance in Cycles?," *Journal of Economic Growth* 10 (2005): 31–53; Donald W. McRobbie et al., *MRI from Picture to Proton* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2; and Herbert Ellern, *Military and Civilian Pyrotechnics* (New York: Chemical Publishing Company, 1968), 33. In military history, research on the causes of the German victory over France in 1940 produced unexpected findings. See Karl-Heinz Frieser, *Blitzkrieg-Legende: Der Westfeldzug 1940* (München: R. Oldenbourg, 1995).

20. Howard, "Uses and Abuses," 8.

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