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Applied Conflict History and the Reflective Practitioner

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Military History

In the 1960s, historians at the department of War Studies, King's College London, argued for some profound changes in the way scholars were engaging with the topic of war. Historians, it was argued, should not only study the decisions and actions of great captains and the material culture of armies, but also the political, social, and economic factors that influence the conduct and experience of military formations in battle. As Sir Michael Howard put in a seminal *Royal United Services Institution (RUSI)* article in 1962:

Wars are not tactical exercises writ large. They are . . . conflicts of *societies*, and they can be fully understood only if one understands the nature of the society fighting them. The roots of victory or defeat often have to be sought far from the battlefield, in political, social, and economic factors.¹

In the early 1990s, a series of conferences were held at Princeton, Yale and the Naval War College in the United States to engage again with these ideas. These important fora formalised the methodological underpinnings of the 'New Military History': an 'effort to integrate the study of military institutions and their actions more closely with other kinds of history'. The study of war, it was argued, had to be more closely related to the study of society, economics, politics and culture. The result has been a generation of innovative scholarship that has significantly deepened our understanding of war and of the relationship between war and society. Indeed, so ingrained are these approaches in the history of war today that it seems 'silly', as Robert Citino has argued, 'to keep calling' the New Military History 'new'.²

A quarter of a century after the formalisation of the 'New Military History', another step change in the way scholars study the history of conflict has emerged. War is increasingly used in an 'applied' manner, as a 'laboratory' in which to study the great challenges facing society. War, as Eric Hobsbawm has argued, 'can bring into the open so much that is normally latent' and 'concentrate and magnify phenomena'. The clarity that paradoxically can emerge from the chaos of war can, as Indivar Kamtekar posits, provide 'a flare of light' that enables us to see society's 'features more clearly'. As a recent Society for Military History 'White Paper' on 'The Role of Military History in the Contemporary Academy' has stressed,

Examining the origins of wars informs us about human behavior . . . Analyzing the nature of war informs us about the psychology of humans . . . and the dynamics of political and social behavior within nations and across populations. And studying the consequences of wars helps us . . . develop a heightened ability for comprehending the elements of political behavior that can lead to sustainable . . . social, political, and economic structures and relationships. Research in military

¹ Michael Howard, 'The Use and Abuse of Military History', *The Royal United Services Institution Journal*, Vol. 107, No. 625 (1962), p. 7.

² Robert M. Citino, 'Military Histories Old and New: A Reinterpretation', *American Historical Review* 112 (October 2007): 1070-90.

history not only informs and enriches the discipline of history, but also informs work in a host of other fields including political science, sociology, and public policy.³

This perspective, that wars can act as a lens on society, is complemented by an empirical reality; wars generate an enormous amount of data. Recent studies, from across the humanities and social sciences, have taken advantage of this dynamic ‘symbiosis’ to provide new insights in the fields of sociology, organisational behaviour, psychology and psychiatry, innovation and technology, economics and strategic studies.⁴

Applied History

The concept of ‘Applied History’ is not a new one. There is a long-term tension among historians over whether history should be ‘pure’, i.e. studied for its own sake, so that we can better understand the past,⁵ or ‘applied’, i.e. studied to better understand contemporary challenges and dynamics. Although historians such as A.J.P. Taylor, and others, have argued that history has no use whatsoever beyond helping us to understand the past, most historians would argue that it is simply inaccurate to argue that history teaches us nothing.⁶ The great Greek historians understood history in this way. In the fifth century BC, Thucydides declared that the past was an aid in the interpretation of the future.⁷ In 2002, the History and Policy partnership was set up with similar understandings in mind.⁸ Even more recently, Niall Ferguson and others have set up an ‘Applied History’ Project at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. According to Ferguson and his team, ‘Applied History is the explicit attempt to illuminate current challenges and choices by analyzing historical precedents and analogues’. Mainstream (‘pure’) historians, they argue, ‘begin with an event or era and attempt to provide an account of what happened and why. Applied historians begin with a current choice or predicament and analyze the historical record to provide perspective, stimulate imagination, find clues about what is likely to happen, suggest possible interventions, and assess probable consequences.’⁹ The goal of the Harvard team is to establish a White House Council of Historical Advisors in the clear and undisguised hope of influencing policy.

³ Tami Davis Biddle and Robert M. Citino, ‘The Role of Military History in the Contemporary Academy’, A Society for Military History White Paper (November 2014), p. 1.

⁴ Anthony King, *The Combat Soldier: Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Oxford University Press, 2013); Saumitra Jha and Steven Wilkinson, ‘Does Combat Experience Foster Organisation Skill? Evidence from Ethnic Cleansing during the Partition of South Asia’, *American Political Science Review*, 106(4) (November, 2012); Edgar Jones and Simon Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD: Military Psychiatry from 1900 to the Gulf War* (Hove: Psychology Press, 2005); David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920-1970* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer. (London: Belknap Press, 2114); Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2014); Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵ John A. Lynn II, ‘Breaching the Walls of Academe: The Purposes, Problems, and Prospects of Military History’, *Acad. Quest.* (2008), p. 23.

⁶ Margaret MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (London: Profile, 2010), p. 141.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ <http://www.historyandpolicy.org>.

⁹ <http://www.belfercenter.org/project/applied-history-project>.

As potentially significant as these innovations might appear for policy makers and our understanding of society, it must be noted that ‘Applied History’ has probably its greatest proponents in the sub-discipline of military history. John A Lynn has argued, for example, that there are three ‘genres’ of military history: popular and academic, which together broadly fall under the category of ‘pure’ history, and ‘applied’ – typically referring to the use of military history as a tool to educate military professionals and prepare them for the challenges of contemporary conflict.¹⁰ An understanding of the past, it is argued, can greatly aid the development of professional judgement, and professional judgment is central to the performance of all military institutions.

The Military and Applied History

To the military professional, arguments for the centrality of military history to curricula at staff colleges and military academies might seem a little anachronistic at a time of profound technological and conceptual change. With the ever-increasing importance of artificial intelligence (AI), ‘drones’ and space to military affairs, there appears little room for the study of Wellington at Waterloo, attrition on the Western Front or the struggle for Normandy in the Second World War. With the character of war changing fast, it appears that the best way to prepare for the future is to focus more on the methods and theories championed in the political sciences and the field of strategic studies.

There is undoubtedly much to learn from these disciplines. But they also have profound weaknesses when it comes to training the professional problem solver. Engaging predominantly with disciplines that put a premium on theory can leave the future decision maker vulnerable. If policy is developed based on a belief that $x + y = z$, and this understanding proves incorrect, it is not only individuals, but institutions and states that will fail. In the context of the field of strategic studies, ‘empiricism’, as one high profile scholar has put it recently, ‘seems to be out of fashion’.

Theory, having been granted primacy, creates expectations of reality and so prevents the hard-headed interpretation of events, blocking rather than refracting the light shed on theory by change. The result, paradoxically, is that historians can be readier to identify change than are students of strateg[ic studies].¹¹

Clausewitz fully understood this dynamic. As he sought systems, ‘an explanatory theoretical framework’, that ‘would enable him to understand war as a general phenomenon’, he ‘was constantly frustrated by his own intellectual and historical rigour’. Practice, as Hew Strachan has argued, ‘intruded, resulting in his recognition of exceptions to his own rules’.¹²

Students of history, thus, in many ways, stand in a unique and privileged position; by engaging with the past they learn that human behaviour is infinitely diverse, complex and contingent. ‘History’, according to Marc Bloch, ‘is, in its essentials, the science of change’,¹³ because by studying real events, and by brining intelligence to bear on

¹⁰ John A. Lynn II, ‘Breaching the Walls of Academe: The Purposes, Problems, and Prospects of Military History’, *Acad. Quest.* (2008), pp. 20-2.

¹¹ Strachan, *The Direction of War*, pp. 254-5.

¹² Strachan, *The Direction of War*, p. 258-9.

¹³ Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat: a statement of evidence written in 1940*, trans. Gerard Hopkins (New

problems of analytical comparison, it succeeds in discovering, with ever-increasing accuracy, the parallel movements of cause and effect'.¹⁴ An 'awareness of context' and a 'command of the sources' ensures that students of the history of war understand the 'proper relationship between theory and evidence' and the complex and contingent relationships between cause and effect.¹⁵

This is not to argue that military staff colleges and academies should turn their backs on political science and strategic studies – far from it. Interdisciplinary dialogues and cooperation remain essential. The study of history, even in its 'pure' form, engages with social science perspectives; to suggest that one can understand the past without understanding the range of human behaviours and motivations is entirely problematic. However, in the development of theory, it is argued that students of history, and military history in particular, might (perhaps ironically) be better placed to take a lead – they may be best placed to develop, as Jeremy Black has argued, 'analytical concepts that do not treat the world as uniform'.¹⁶ In the same way that some of the best academic historians use history as the underpinning of the study of strategy or innovation theory, might not military students use history, and military history, to better understand the changing character of war – with all its technological and conceptual complexities.

The Reflective Practitioner

The 'use of history', as Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May have argued, 'can stimulate imagination. Seeing the past can help one envision alternative futures'.¹⁷ As Margaret MacMillan argues,

History can help us to be wise; it can also suggest to us what the likely outcome of our actions might be. There are no clear blueprints to be discovered in history that can help us shape the future as we wish. Each historical event is a unique congeries of factors, people and chronology. Yet by examining the past, we can get some useful lessons about how to proceed and some warnings about what is or is not likely to happen . . . history, if it is used with care, can present us with alternatives, help us to form the questions we need to ask of the present.¹⁸

The past might not set out the path for policy, but it does shine a light on the human condition, on the characteristics of human behaviour and on cognitive processes such as tactics, operations, strategy and innovation. History can help us identify the component parts of problems and how they interrelate. It can help us develop that most prized of all institutional assets – the reflective practitioner (individuals who constantly analyse and evaluate their decisions and actions in the search for creative and effective solutions to complex problems).

York, 1999), pp. 117-18, Quoted in Strachan, *The Direction of War*, p. 254.

¹⁴ Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat: a statement of evidence written in 1940*, trans. Gerard Hopkins (New York, 1999), pp. 117-18, Quoted in Strachan, *The Direction of War*, p. 254.

¹⁵ Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, p. 240.

¹⁶ Jeremy Black, *History Today*, November 2003.

¹⁷ Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. xv.

¹⁸ Margaret MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (London: Profile, 2010), p. 153-4.

Military education is after all about the development of professional men and women so that they can think and act beyond conventional norms. Military professionals can be trained to have the knowledge and skills for expected and repetitive military processes. However, they must be educated as reflective practitioners if they are to: perform in unexpected situations and contexts; propose new perspectives, take winning decisions and be proactive; develop critical use of information; distinguish between multiple and often contradictory sources of information; and be creative and adaptable.

It is the reflective practitioner that ultimately wins wars. In equal measure, the quest for peace demands feats of imagination and reflection as ‘concerted and impressive’ as the creativeness invested in conflict.¹⁹ We must all remember that no plan, theory or *a priori* philosophical perspective survives first contact with the enemy.

¹⁹ Christopher Clark, ‘This is a Reality, Not a Threat’, *The New York Review of Books*, 22 November 2018.