**Studying Mars and Clio: Or How Not to Write about the Ethics of Military Conduct and Military History**

In a recent article, ‘Savage Warfare: Violence and the Rule of Colonial Difference in Early British Counterinsurgency’, Kim Wagner rightly argues that violence was a ubiquitous feature of colonial rule and that this fact must be acknowledged if we are to fully confront the legacies of empire, and their implications for conflict today.[[1]](#footnote-1) In presenting his case, however, Wagner makes serious historical errors as well as the sweeping accusation that military historians, especially those working in military education, are guilty of abandoning the scholarly standards of the historical discipline, perpetuating indifference to suffering outside the Western World, and having ‘weaponized’ history to justify military interventions and coercive and unjust treatment of non-white populations.

These unsubstantiated accusations constitute an attack on the ethical and scholarly integrity of an entire field of history and the scholars within it. We have written this response to address the deficiencies in Wagner’s assertions about the use of expanding bullets and colonial military conduct, the historiography of colonial violence, and current state of what he calls ‘parochial military history.’

**I. On Expanding Bullets and International Law**

Hierarchical conceptions of race undoubtedly underpinned the entire colonial system. However, the evidence does not support Wagner’s claim that the adoption of expanding bullets by the British military is evidence of a specifically colonial form of military doctrine premised on a racialized double standard in the treatment of European and non-European opponents. In fact, Britain adopted expanding ammunition for use against all adversaries.[[2]](#footnote-2) In making this decision, the army invoked technical rather than racial or cultural justifications, namely, the need for greater stopping power against a cavalry or infantry charge in both European and colonial warfare. It was only at the Hague Conference in 1899 that Britain briefly invoked civilizational arguments, in an unsuccessful attempt to distract attention from the fact that it intended to use the ammunition against European adversaries. Once the mask fell, Britain’s delegate, John Ardagh, explicitly abandoned this line of rhetoric as incompatible with British aims to use expanding bullets against all enemies. He subsequently ‘abstained from any further mention of savage warfare’ reasoning that Britain may need ‘not for savage warfare alone but for civilized warfare too … a projectile which shall be capable of stopping a charge of cavalry or a bayonet charge at close quarters.’[[3]](#footnote-3)

Britain’s conduct at the conference created an international and domestic backlash that eventually forced it to abandon the use of expanding ammunition altogether. The process of withdrawing this ammunition from the field highlights several reasons, not considered by Wagner and not determined by racism or by military doctrine, why expanding ammunition was likelier to have been used against non-European adversaries. First, symmetry and asymmetry were powerful determinants on policy. The fear of reprisal from an enemy capable of manufacturing and using similar projectiles was an important motivation in the immediate withdrawal of expanding bullets from regions of the world where they could accidentally be used against such adversaries. If race had been the over-riding determinant in the decision-making process, why would such ammunition have been distributed in the first place to forces stationed in Britain and regions of the Empire where they were unlikely to encounter non-white opponents? Second, even after the expanding bullets were universally withdrawn from use, British officers were likelier to order their subordinates to file hard-nosed bullets, turning them into expanding bullets, when confronted with adversaries that did not subscribe to the norm that combatants should fall out of action once wounded.[[4]](#footnote-4) Fear of being overwhelmed by an adversary who did not conform to European rules on the management of violence determined how the new norm was enforced. Third, by speaking of a single racialized ‘colonial military doctrine’, Wagner conflates the different approaches and attitudes of the Cabinet in London and the governments of semiautonomous colonies, such as Natal, which continued to issue expanding bullets to its militias long after such ammunition had been withdrawn from British regular troops. As such, it is misleading for Wagner to write about the Mome Gorge massacre, an atrocity perpetrated by volunteer militias and not the British Army, as though it resulted from a singular overarching doctrine.

If “military doctrine” is to mean anything, historians must carefully examine how it is developed and drilled into a military organisation’s culture, and what impact it has on that organisation’s actual conduct.[[5]](#footnote-5) Wagner has not met this standard. Instead, he invokes Charles Callwell’s *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, as though it ‘merely reiterated pre-existing ideas amongst colonial officers who had served in various campaigns throughout the British Empire.’[[6]](#footnote-6) That is to say, he assumes, without providing any corroborating evidence, that Callwell’s handbook embodied official practice across the British Empire, and that the tactics it described were unique to colonial combat. In fact, exemplary violence, the destruction of housing and food, and even racial rhetoric, were not unknown in European war, especially when regular forces met with irregular resistance. All Western militaries gravitated toward extreme practices if left unrestrained. What mattered and what distinguished the practices of one military from another were the sources of restraint in the development of a military organisation’s practices. Was the military able to exert exclusive control over the use of violence in colonial war? Or were politicians, bureaucrats, diplomats, and lawyers from other departments able to interfere and limit the propensity toward the extreme practices? These questions matter, yet Wagner never so much as acknowledges them.

Equally problematic is the assumption, made throughout the essay that “savage warfare” referred to a separate and distinct code of legal conduct. Tim Moreman has demonstrated that military manuals used the expression as a ‘term of art’ for combat characterized by certain types of organisation, equipment, and tactics.[[7]](#footnote-7) This helps explain why during the Cabinet debates that followed the Hague Conference, George Wyndham was able to remark, without any irony, that the propensity of British troops to charge with bayonet made them particularly susceptible to expanding ammunition: “an expanding bullet will be effective against us, as against savages, because our men, like savages, will come to closer quarters [more] than other civilized troops.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

In sum, Wagner fails to demonstrate that expanding ammunition was the result of “deeply encoded” racial assumptions, or that colonial violence was governed by a racialized “colonial military doctrine.” Undoubtedly there were many racists in the British Army, and Callwell’s work was imbued with common racist assumptions, but this does not demonstrate the existence of a single ‘colonial military doctrine’ which condoned the use of excessive force solely on the grounds of race.

**II. Debating Historical Counter-insurgency**

Such aversion to nuance regarding British military attitudes to the expanding bullets is mirrored in Wagner’s misleading, selective, and deeply flawed survey of the debates and historiography on counter-insurgency over the past fifteen years. He claims that military historians have failed to acknowledge the “pervasive nature of colonial violence” and have “increasingly invoked a narrative concerning British expertise and proficiency in counterinsurgency.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The reality is almost the complete opposite. The literature that emerged during the decade of counter-insurgency operations following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 exposed the hollowness of claims for British pre-eminence in these conflicts, or their unique ‘hearts and minds’ approach to pacifying hostile populations. A growing body of work on Britain’s historical and contemporary counter-insurgency overwhelmingly emphasised the delusions, flaws, and brutality which had characterised its practice.[[10]](#footnote-10) The sceptical perspective is now dominant, in large measure due to the exhaustively researched, comparative study by David French published in 2011.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Nevertheless, even if it has been displaced by recent work, Wagner is right to identify the existence of a scholarly tradition keen to demonstrate the humanity and success of Britain’s counter-insurgencies by misleadingly comparing it against the supposed blundering brutality of France and the United States. This approach is exemplified in the influential works by Thomas Mockaitis and John Nagl, published respectively in 1990 and 2002.[[12]](#footnote-12) Yet Wagner pays no heed to chronology. Both these texts were written before 2003; they were partly intended to spur reform in the American military to be more prepared for low intensity conflicts. Already by 2007, scholars were challenging the scholarly rigour of these and associated studies.[[13]](#footnote-13)

In recent years, military historians have continued to criticize and dismiss triumphalist accounts. Rod Thornton’s claim in 2004 that Victorian sensibilities established a preference for “minimum force” in British counter-insurgency has been challenged by Huw Bennett, Bruno Reis and Andrew Mumford, among others.[[14]](#footnote-14) When Thomas Mockaitis argued that critics of colonial violence were unfairly applying today’s ethical standards to the past, he was challenged by David Martin Jones and M.L.R. Smith, and Giora Goodman.[[15]](#footnote-15) David Betz’s article advocating Charles Callwell’s *Small Wars* as a relevant guide for contemporary military strategy, meanwhile, has been comprehensively ignored by other scholars.[[16]](#footnote-16) It is only late in Wagner’s essay that he cites, among the references to support his view that ‘slaughter *was* the ‘British Way’, in theory and in practice’, the critical work of several military historians - Matthew Hughes, David French, and Douglas Porch. Wagner simultaneously relies on the findings of military historians to support the claim that brutality was inherent in British colonial warfare and decries their inability to produce anything other than apologies for rank militarism and modern day Empire. These positions are mutually incompatible, and no amount of torturous logic can enable one to subscribe to both.

**III. ‘Parochial Military History’**

Wagner’s claims demonstrate his deep-seated disregard for the scholarly standards of military historians, to whom he ascribes the practice of viewing texts such as Callwell’s *Small Wars* in isolation from their contexts, and of seeing in them ‘valuable lessons of colonial warfare’ of relevance to modern militaries.[[17]](#footnote-17) Military historians are, according to Wagner, ‘parochial’. This notion, which Wagner employs in his article and has elaborated upon elsehwere, rests on the argument that military history ‘has followed a separate trajectory, operating with aims, priorities and methodologies quite its own’ when compared to the rest of the discipline of History. These aims, he contends, conflict with the requirements of sound scholarship, as they encourage military historians to produce ‘essentially weaponized history: the instrumentalization of the past as a tool to be deployed in the present’.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Wagner’s writings leave the reader with the impression that ‘operational military history’ and ‘war and society’ approaches to the history of warfare developed in quite distinct ways. The former appears hidebound, anachronistic, and linked to militaries themselves, the latter methodologically and theoretically progressive, and born of the academy. In reality, their evolution since the Second World War has been inexorably intertwined.[[19]](#footnote-19) Military historians have long co-existed in a varied field of intellectual inquiry subject to the rigors and benefits of methodological diversity, and have contributed to that field as well as learning from it. This has fostered a series of wide-ranging disciplinary debates such as that over British counter-insurgency detailed above, and also a discourse surrounding the ontological foundations which underpin the study of war in the modern academy.[[20]](#footnote-20) To suggest that military history is a reactionary throwback, stubbornly resisting the modernising impulses of an enlightened academy, is thus hardly realistic.

Moreover, Wagner’s accusation that historians working in military education are compromised by their relationship to those institutions and that this association creates ‘weaponized’ history also rests upon lazy typecasting. For example, Wagner believes that Callwell’s *Small Wars* is ‘being read today much as it was a century ago – as a manual for counterinsurgency.’[[21]](#footnote-21) This is a curious and erroneous charge based upon no substantive evidence. Several of the authors of this essay are past or present members of King’s College London’s Defence Studies Department, which provides education to UK and international armed forces personnel. Wagner appears to view this to be a violation of scholarly integrity in and of itself, dismissing recent research from the Department as ‘sympathetic institutional history and very much a product of Defence Studies as practiced at King’s College London.’[[22]](#footnote-22) Leaving such ill-informed type-casting aside, had Dr Wagner inquired, we would have been glad to inform him that Callwell does not feature prominently in the curriculum at the Joint Services Command and Staff College. Our focus - and our students’ interest - tends to be directed towards counter-insurgency as practiced during the era of decolonization and after. Furthermore, it is not acceptable to allege, as Wagner does without substantiation, that academics working in close proximity to the military bend their scholarship to serve modern military agendas. Historians who choose to use their pens for the benefit of military education are not automatically ‘weaponized.’ Nor are they somehow exempt from the same processes of peer review and external scrutiny as their colleagues who teach civilians. Far from defaulting to obsequious platitudes toward the armed forces they work with, some of the most strident critiques of how modern militaries learn and think have emanated from academics who work at precisely those same institutions.[[23]](#footnote-23) As John Lynn once noted, military historians often bristle at the military preference for them ‘to play the part of a pundit’ since, ‘The attitude of certainty demanded of a pundit runs counter to the need for complexity, qualification, and contemplation essential to scholarship.’[[24]](#footnote-24) At its best, academic military history in the military education environment insists on the complexity of past conflicts; it does not distil them into simplified ‘lessons learned.’

It is true to say that military historians have frequently found themselves drawn towards reflections on the link between past and present. Yet this approach has been far from unthinking, and is reflected in recent literature on the relationship between historical understanding and modern, or indeed future, warfare.[[25]](#footnote-25) Nor is this out of step with broader trends in academia– something that Wagner himself acknowledges.[[26]](#footnote-26) Whether in the pursuit of good scholarship, or of underlining the value of History in an era of metrics and impact statements, constructive dialogue between sub-disciplines is vitally important. For Wagner, however, ‘one cannot serve both Clio and Mars and do both well.’[[27]](#footnote-27) This is a nice rhetorical flourish, but it is a poor argument, and to imply, as Wagner does, that imperial historians have nothing to learn from military history is directly antithetical to this aim. The history of conflict – whether written by imperial or military historians – deserves better.

1. K.A. Wagner, ‘Savage Warfare: Violence and the Rule of Colonial Difference in Early British Counterinsurgency,’ *History Workshop Journal*, 85 (2018), pp. 217-237. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Scott Keefer, ‘“Explosive Missals”: International Law, Technology, and Security in Nineteenth-Century Disarmament Conferences,’ *War in History*, 21/4 (2014), p. 466. See also [T]he [N]ational [A]rchives: CAB 37/51/94. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Ardagh, Memorandum, enclosure in Pauncefote to Salisbury, 15 June 1899, no. 168, TNA FO 412/65. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On reciprocity see A.R.S. July, 31, 1901 in IOR/L/MIL/7/12030, British Library. On filing see TNA WO 32/8424. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Isabel Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Wagner, ‘Savage Warfare’, p. 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. T.R. Moreman, *The Army in India and the Development of Frontier Warfare, 1849-1947* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), pp. 73–76, p. 83, pp. 87–88, p. 124, p. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. George Wyndham, Dec. 1, 1899, in TNA CAB 37/51/94. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Wagner, ‘Savage Warfare,’ pp. 218-219. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For studies explicitly connecting the historical and the contemporary, see: D.H. Ucko and R. Egnell, *Counterinsurgency in Crisis: Britain and the Challenges of Modern Warfare* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); D. Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. D. French, *The British Way in Counter-Insurgency, 1945-1967* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. T.R. Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency, 1919-60* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990); J.A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (London: Praeger, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. H. Bennett, ‘The Mau Mau Emergency as Part of the British Army’s Post-War Counter-Insurgency Experience’, *Defense and Security Analysis*, 23/2 (2007), pp.143-163. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. R. Thornton, ‘The British Army and the Origins of its Minimum Force Philosophy,’ *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 15/1 (2004), pp. 83-106; H. Bennett, ‘Minimum force in British counterinsurgency,’ *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 21/3 (2010), pp. 459-475; B.C. Reis, ‘The Myth of British Minimum Force in Counterinsurgency Campaigns during Decolonisation (1945-1970),’ *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 34/2 (2011), pp. 245-279; A. Mumford, *The Counter-Insurgency Myth: The British experience of irregular warfare* (London: Routledge, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. T.R. Mockaitis, ‘The minimum force debate: contemporary sensibilities meet imperial practice,’ *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 23/4-5 (2012), pp. 762-780; D.M. Jones and M.L.R. Smith, ‘Myth and the small war tradition: Reassessing the discourse of British counter-insurgency,’ *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 24/3 (2013), pp. 436-464; G. Goodman, ‘“Troops were then forced to fire”: British army crowd control in Palestine, November 1945,’ *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 26/2 (2015), pp. 271-291. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. D. Betz, ‘Counter-insurgency, Victorian Style,’ *Survival*, 54/4 (2012), pp. 161-182; apart from Betz and Wagner, only one other author has cited this article, according to Google Scholar. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Wagner, ‘Savage Warfare’, p. 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. K.A. Wagner ‘Seeing Like a Solider: The Amritsar Massacre and the Politics of Military History’, in M. Thomas and G. Curless (eds.), *Decolonization and Conflict: Colonial Comparisons and Legacies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 23-38, quotation at pp. 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. P. Paret, *Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. T. Barkawi, ‘Decolonising War’, *European Journal of International Security*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2016, pp. 199-214. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Wagner, ‘Savage Warfare’, p.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See, for instance, K. Wagner, review of C. Tripodi, *Edge of Empire: The British Political Officer and Tribal Administrator on the North-West Frontier, 1877-1947*, *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2013, p. 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. J. Johnson-Freese, *Educating America’s Military* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012); C. Tripodi, ‘The British Army, “Understanding”, and the Illusion of Control’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 41/5 (2018), pp. 632-658. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Lynn, ‘Breaching the Walls of Academe’, p. 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See, for instance: W. Murray and R. Hart Sinnreich (eds.), *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. A. Walsham, ‘Introduction: Past and…Presentism’, *Past & Present*, 234 (2017), p. 214; Wagner, ‘Seeing Like a Solider’, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Wagner, ‘Seeing Like a Soldier’, p. 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)