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Estonian Yearbook of Military History

E E S T I S Õ J A A J A L O O A A S T A R A A M A T

THE PAST – A SOLDIER’S GUIDE FOR THE PRESENT?

EXPERIENCE, HISTORY AND
THEORY IN MILITARY EDUCATION

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The past – a soldier's guide for the present?

Experience, History and Theory in Military Education

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Introduction

Kaarel Piirimäe

This yearbook is the result of the 9th Estonian military history conference, “The past – soldier’s guide for the present? Experience, History and Theory in Military Education,” which took place in Tartu in May 2018. It was organized by the Estonian War Museum – General Laidoner Museum in cooperation with the Estonian Military Academy.

While laying the conceptual basis for the conference, we were inspired in part by the success of the 7th conference of 2016, which had explored the ways military organizations envision and predict future wars. At that conference it became clear that, while there has certainly been a fair amount of technological futurism in war preparations, history and experience has always been an important point of reference. But what kind of history? What kind of experience? – this was the moot question.

In his memorable, starkly down-to-earth keynote lecture, Martin van Creveld warned against overemphasizing academic studies in military education:

War is a practical business – at times, so much so as to discourage abstract thought about it. It has much in common with playing an instrument or, at the higher levels, conducting an orchestra. The objective is victory, not dishing up all sorts of insights. Not even the best theories can save us from the enemy’s sharp sword. The best teacher of war is war. Commanders must start by mastering their job at the lowest level. Next, they must proceed step by step until the most competent reach the highest level of all. With each step additional factors enter the picture. Some are military, others political, economic, social, cultural, and religious. At the top, there is hardly any aspect of human behaviour which does not impinge on war’s conduct.¹

¹ Martin van Creveld, “Studying War”, unpublished notes for the keynote lecture at the conference “Visions of War: Experience, Imagination and Predictions of War in the Past and the Present,” Estonian War Museum – General Laidoner Museum, 19–20 April 2016, Tallinn.

Thus, while discouraging excessive dwelling on academic subjects at the lower levels, Creveld ended by laying great weight on history at higher levels of military education:

To fire one's weapon, or command a platoon, experience is enough so that little history and theory are needed. But the higher up one gets and the more factors enter the picture, the less we can count on experience and the more important therefore history and theory.²

Encouraged in part by Creveld's keynote, we wanted to study in greater depth the role of military history in officers' education and training. We asked scholars to critically consider the following questions: What is the position of history in military pedagogy? To what extent should armed forces, beside tactics, study the political, cultural and social contexts of war-fighting? Is it necessary to understand also the civilian perspective on the conduct of war? How can one assure that history is taught "in width, in depth, and in context", as was suggested by Michael Howard?³

The other stimulus for the choice of the topic was the ongoing crisis in the military history discipline in Estonia. As Igor Kopõtin noted in 2016, there was a disagreement between military professionals and civilian historians, as the first doubted in the ability of the second to gain any useful insights from their research into military topics.⁴ For example, in 2016 a meeting was held in Tartu between civilian military historians and representatives of the Estonian Military Academy (EMA). An officer from EMA explained the armed forces' point of view, comparing historians to "spies", who similar to historians provide the army with "data". The problem, he said, was that often the military did not know what they needed to know, and when they realised what they needed to know, they needed to know it fast; there was however no use whatsoever in historians offering their "data" to the military by themselves.⁵ This conflict, the divergence of

² Ibid.

³ Michael Howard, "The Use and Abuse of Military History," *The RUSI Journal* 107, no. 625 (1962): 4–10.

⁴ Igor Kopõtin, "Sõjaajaloo õpetamisest ja uurimisest," *Sõdur* 6 (2016): 45–49.

⁵ Kaarel Piirimäe, "Sõjaajalugu – kellele ja milleks? Sõjaajaloo perspektiivid (III)," *Tuna. Aja-lookultuuriajakiri* 1 (2017): 146–149.

views in the armed forces and the civilian world, Kopõtin observed, was not unique to Estonia but had been played out along similar lines in other countries; it was to be regretted that Estonia was not too keen to learn from the experience of others and was essentially trying to re-invent the wheel.⁶

By organizing the 2018 conference, “The past – soldier’s guide for the present?”, we wanted to inform the Estonian debates by bringing examples from other countries, but also to look into Estonia’s own – forgotten and neglected – experience from the period of independence between the world wars. Looking back from the vantage point of 2020, we have not been overly successful – yet – as the crisis in the military history discipline in the Estonian Armed Forces has not abated. Whereas there were three historians on the payroll of the Military Academy before 2016, now there is only one, and the utility of history in (the first and second levels of) officer education is in serious doubt.

Perhaps there is no need to worry? Maybe war is a practical business that does not require “dishing up all sorts of insights,” as Creveld said? Still, we prefer take a cue from Creveld’s assurance that if a military professional rises higher from the level of firing a weapon and leading a platoon, learning from history becomes a must.

Moreover, this selection of articles – based on the 2018 conference papers – that are presented in this yearbook provides much ammunition for arguing for the practical need of history in military education. Moreover, they give many useful ideas about how to think about the nature of military history, and this is useful for understanding not only military history as part of officer education but for contemplating the discipline of history as such. However, in order to be clear that we are doing it not for the pure pleasure of abstract theorizing, let us end with another dire warning from Martin van Creveld:

War is the most important thing in the world. When the chips are down, it rules over the existence of every single country, government and individual. That is why, though it may come but once in a hundred years,

⁶ Kopõtin, “Sõjaajaloo õpetamisest,” 49.

it must be prepared for every day. When the bodies lie cold and stiff, and the survivors mourn over them, those in charge have failed in their duty.⁷

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⁷ Creveld, "Studying War."

The Study of Ancient and Medieval Military History: Benefits for professional military education

Clifford J. Rogers

Abstract. There is broad agreement that the study of military history is an essential component of professional education for military officers. Although many successful modern commanders, including Napoleon and MacArthur, advocated extending their reading back to ancient times, Clausewitz wrote: “The further back one goes, the less useful military history becomes.” This essay argues, to the contrary, that officers have much to gain by including pre-modern warfare in their studies. A larger and more diverse data-set of examples and case studies allows for more reliable generalization, gives more opportunities for inspiration, and helps guard against the tempting but unwise assumptions that the next war will be similar to the last one, and the equally tempting and equally unwise presumption that material strength alone will ensure victory. Moreover, historians of ancient and medieval warfare, like officers exercising their core professional responsibility in combat, must grapple with scanty and conflicting evidence. Pre-modern history, like war, is a realm of uncertainty; many of the “facts” can only be known as probabilities. The best preparation for seeing through the fog of war, therefore, may be the exercise of peering through the mists of time.

The question of why military leaders should study the wars of the ancient and medieval periods is a subset of the broader question of why they should study military history at all.

To answer that, we might offer the glib response: “because General Wolfe, Emperor Napoleon, General Jomini, General Clausewitz, Field Marshal von Moltke the Elder, Marshal Foch, General Patton, General

MacArthur, and President Eisenhower all say they should.”¹ Patton, for example – in a letter written on June 6, 1944 – instructed his son, a West Point cadet, that “To be a successful soldier, you must know history.”²

But I need to go beyond such general assertions of utility if I want to argue for the importance and value of studying a particular sort of military history. The question is thus not *whether* the study of past wars is valuable, but rather *how and why* it is valuable to military professionals. Once we have a firm sense of the mechanisms by which this intellectual endeavour helps prepare leaders for the conduct of war, we will be in a position to examine whether there are ways in which the study of pre-modern conflicts would especially well support those processes, or conversely whether the benefits of historical study might be reduced if that study were limited to relatively recent warfare. It should be emphasized at the start that the topic at hand is the *study* of military history – a process – not *knowledge* of military history, which is just one of the valuable results of the process.

In order to recapitulate the basic arguments for why and how officers should study military history, let me begin with some thoughts on the value of studying history in general as part of a well-rounded education, for any student preparing to enter any of the Professions with a capital P (that is, in Samuel Huntington’s sense of the word).³ Next I will turn to the importance of studying military history for military professionals,

¹ Most of these distinguished soldiers will be quoted below. For the views of Moltke, see Hajo Holborn, “The Prusso-German School: Moltke and the Rise of the General Staff,” – *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 289–290. Foch, like Moltke a disciple of Clausewitz on this topic, in his *Principles of War* notes that professional military instruction should be based on application of principles to historical case-studies, “in order (1) to prepare for *experience*, (2) to teach the *art of commanding*, (3) lastly, to impart the *habit of acting correctly without having to reason* [things through].” Ferdinand Foch, *Principles of War*, tr. Hilaire Belloc (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), 11; see also *ibid*, *Precepts and Judgments*, tr. Hilaire Belloc (London: Chapman and Hall, 1919), 170 (“To keep the brain of an army going in time of peace...there is no book more fruitful to the student than that of history.”), 184, 222.

² George S. Patton Jr., letter to George S. Patton IV, 6 June 1944, in Benjamin Patton with Jennifer Scruby, *Growing Up Patton: Reflections on Heroes, History, and Family Wisdom* (New York: Dutton Caliber, 2012), 50.

³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1957).

cribbing liberally from Sir B. H. Liddell Hart and Sir Michael Howard. Finally, I will address my narrower topic.

So why should we study history at all?⁴ First, because the rigorous study of history provides the same benefits that can come with any other aspect of a high-quality liberal education: exercise in developing valuable questions; identifying, finding, collecting, and organizing relevant information; assessing the quality of the evidence in light of its sources; analysing that information to identify patterns and gaps; filling in gaps and otherwise solving problems with the available data; refining questions and hypotheses in an iterative fashion as the research develops; reaching conclusions through rigorous thought, taking full account of arguments and facts that line up against your hypothesis as well as those that support it; then employing effective writing – with good structure and clear, concise, correct prose – to communicate your analysis and conclusions in a persuasive, efficient, and hopefully even elegant way. The study of history, moreover, should develop not just the student's mind, but also the student's character. History is a discipline built on the foundation of empathy: historical thinking requires an effort to see different worlds through the eyes of those who lived in them, to consider decisions and actions in the context of social constructions of values and mores that are almost never identical to our own. And to do the job properly, a historian needs to be curious, observant, open-minded, hard-working, humble, and resilient, and willing to learn from mistakes. The value of those characteristics for military officers should be obvious.

Second, because the human world of today is an extension of the human world of the past, and its current structures, tensions, problems, and ruptures cannot really be understood without knowledge and appreciation of their origins and development.

⁴ Although the following paragraphs are based on my own reflection on a quarter-century of teaching military history to West Point cadets, and not at all on Tosh's book, those looking for a thoughtful and concise exploration "historical mindedness" and "applied history" have practical benefits for the development of citizens (and officials) may see John Tosh, *Why History Matters*, 2nd ed. (London: Red Globe Press, 2019). Tosh, however, falls prey to the same sort of emphasis on modern history that can discourage officers looking for "practical" lessons from studying medieval or ancient times – even though he himself also recognizes that "paradoxically the value of the past lies precisely in what is different from our world." *Ibid.*, ix, 26, 128–29.

Third, to quote Sir Basil H. Liddell Hart: “There is no excuse for any literate person if he is less than three thousand years old in mind.”⁵ There is an old trope that age and experience bring wisdom. That is an oversimplification, of course – we have probably all known old men or women who were not particularly wise, and as Frederick the Great observed, “A mule who had served on ten campaigns under Prince Eugène would not become a better tactician through the experience; and it must be admitted, to the shame of humanity, that on this point of lazy stupidity many old officers are no better than such a mule.”⁶ Wisdom does not come simply from growing old and gaining experience, but rather from *reflecting* on experience with an open mind and a desire to learn. Gaining wisdom requires us to use the feedback from expectations that prove either justified or unjustified to see more deeply into the complexities of human interaction (including the interactions between individual humans; interactions of individual people with human constructs like governments, businesses, armies, or coalitions; and interactions between one such construct and another). Such reflection can provide a better appreciation not just of *which* factors shape the outcomes of such interactions, but also their relative *importance* and how their weights vary under different specific circumstances.

It is in some ways easiest to gain wisdom from our own personal experiences, which we observe most fully and feel most immediately. But the benefits of reflection on experience are only to a limited extent transferable from one sort of experience to another, and both the brevity of human life and the limits of our ability to observe our present world restrict our ability to gain wisdom through direct experience. From observation of our own daily lives, it can be difficult to gain a sense of how much of the human interaction we witness on a daily basis is shaped by universal (or at least general) patterns and processes, versus ones distinct to our own cultures, times, and circumstances. Moreover, the focal length

⁵ B. H. Liddell Hart, *Why Don't We Learn from History* (London: P.E.N. Books/George Allen & Unwin, n.d., first published 1944), 7–8.

⁶ G. A. Büttner, *Mémoires du Baron de la Motte Fouqué... dans lesquels on a inséré sa correspondance intéressante avec Frédéric II, Roi de Prusse*, vol. 1 (Berlin: François de LaGarde, 1788), 45.

of lived experience is short. Many of us live our entire lives without direct observations of the big decisions made by national or world leaders. Even those individuals who reach the pinnacles of power and responsibility often have only a few years operating at that level in which to gain experience of it – and meanwhile little time for to spare for reflection. It follows that if we want wisdom to help us address or understand big problems like whether an international military alliance should be expanded, or whether economic sanctions should be threatened or employed against a rival power, or whether fighting an actual shooting war may be justified, we need to draw on a greater range of experience than our own direct observation can provide, or indeed than we can get from the indirect observation (through the media) of the events of just our own lifetimes.

If it is granted that history as we know it was invented by Thucydides, then it is fair to say that the discipline of history was created as a tool to address just that problem. That is clear enough from Thucydides's own text but is perhaps best expressed by his first English translator, Thomas Hobbes, who considered the Athenian the "most Politique Historiographer that ever writ." Why? "He fills his narrations with that choice of matter, and orders them with such judgment, and with such perspicuity and efficacy expresses himself, that, as Plutarch says, he makes his hearer a spectator. For he sets his reader in the assemblies of the People, and in the Senates, at their debating; in the streets, at their sedition; and in the field, at their battles. So that look how much a man of understanding might have added to his experience, if he had then lived, a beholder of their proceedings, and familiar with the men and business of the time; so much, almost, may he profit now, by attentive reading of the same here written. He may from the narrations draw out lessons to himself, and of himself be able to trace the drifts and counsels of the actors to their seats."⁷

The value of gaining wisdom by studying history, though it applies to all citizens, applies *a fortiori* to leaders, and especially to military leaders. Today, unlike in the days of the Roman Republic or the Hundred Years War, most years in most countries pass in peace, or at least in states of

⁷ Thucydides, *Eight Bookes of the Peloponnesian Warre*, tr. Thomas Hobbes (London: Richard Mynne, 1684), n.p. (second page of "To the Readers"); English modernized.

conflict short of actual war. If the core of officership is war-fighting, then, as Michael Howard and others have rightly emphasized, military officers are the only professionals who can be expected to spend years without engaging in the core activity of their profession.⁸ In many armies today, even very senior commanders have never seen a full-scale battle – or if they have, it was likely from the perspective of a company-grade officer. So if wisdom about how to fight a division or a corps, to say nothing of a field army or a national or coalition war effort, especially in a general war between peer competitors, could only come from life experience, then it would of necessity be in very short supply when it next proves most needed. It could be gained on the job, but the cost of that is very high. If having wisdom means anything, it means making somewhat fewer mistakes in complex human interactions than are made by less-wise people, and of all human activities, war is the one where a single mistake is most likely to cost many lives, and could even affect the destiny of a nation. It follows that military leaders have nothing less than a *moral obligation* to seek wisdom through history.⁹ As Eisenhower wrote to the cadets of West Point: “Through a careful and objective study of [past campaigns], a professional officer acquires knowledge of military experience which he himself could not otherwise accumulate. The facts of a given battle may no longer serve any practical purpose... but when the serious student of the military art delves into the reasons for the failure of a specific attack... he is, by this very activity, preparing for a day in which he, under different circumstances, may be facing decisions of vital consequence to his country.”¹⁰

⁸ Michael Howard, “The Use and Abuse of Military History,” originally published in 1962, repr. in *Parameters* 11 (1981), 13; B. H. Liddell Hart, *Why Don't We Learn from History*, revised edition (N.P.: Sophon, 2012), 22–23.

⁹ Liddell Hart was being a bit too limited (since we can profit from good examples as well as bad ones) when he wrote that “History is a catalogue of mistakes. It is our duty to profit by them.” Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *Through the Fog of War* (New York: Random House, 1938), 153.

¹⁰ Dwight D. Eisenhower to the Corps of Cadets, United States Military Academy, 22 April 1959, in *The West Point Atlas of American Wars*, ed. Vincent J. Esposito, vol. 1 (New York: Praeger, 1959), iii. And similarly Douglas MacArthur, “Annual Report (1935),” – *General MacArthur Speeches and Reports*, ed. Edward T. Imparato (Nashville: Turner Publishing, 2000),

I already noted, however, that wisdom gained from one sort of experience transfers only to a limited degree to different sorts of problems or endeavours. Indeed, wisdom gained in one field can lead to worse judgment, rather than better judgment, when applied to a very different area. Does it not then follow that it makes perfect sense to focus officers' historical study on the recent past, which is presumably more like the present and the near future than the distant past is?

Perhaps so, but *not* if that focus is so tight that in-depth knowledge of the last war or the last few wars is pursued to the exclusion of the broader chronological sweep of military history. A general with vicarious experience of high command that stretches back ten, twenty or thirty times as long as his personal experience as a flag officer will surely be at an advantage over one without that historical insight, but such a still-limited chronological scope means knowledge of only a limited number of wars: a data set with a low *N*, which makes false generalizations and bad analogies dangerously likely. As Michael Howard has noted, it is easy to see how wisdom gained by the study of offensive successes of the Franco-Prussian and Russo-Japanese wars might have led to wrong conclusions and assumptions among military planners before the start of the very different First World War, and then in turn how study of the strength of the defence during that war could contribute to a failure to anticipate the full potential of the German *Bewegungskrieg* of 1939–1940.¹¹ “Must we conclude that [the study of] history has misled us?” wondered a French staff officer on the day of the German entry into Paris in the latter year.¹² If it did, though, it must have been a flawed study of history, too focused on the recent past and not enough on the full chronological sweep of history. A historian who had reflected on the campaigns of Alexander the Great should have been aware that a focused onslaught by a relatively small force of better-armoured, highly mobile troops can break through a seemingly powerful front, causing

107: “Devoid of opportunity, in peace, for self-instruction through the actual practice of his profession, the soldier makes maximum use of the historical record in assuring the readiness of himself and his command to function efficiently in emergency.”

¹¹ Howard, “Use and Abuse,” 13.

¹² Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire, ou métier d'historien* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1974), 21.

confusion, then panic, then the dissolution of the opposing force. Students who had examined William the Conqueror's invasion of England in 1066 should have known that contests of grinding attrition are not the only way to win wars. Anyone who had examined the expulsion of the English from Normandy in 1449–1450 ought to have known that even extensive and strong fortifications may not suffice to hold a line if there is not a mobile force capable of winning in open combat to back up the defences. And thoughtful observers who considered these three cases together would have brought home to them that the worst strategic defeats generally arose in part from fractures or fissures in the losing side's body politic.

Moreover, recent history studied in isolation might have been misleading in 1940, but a broader view of the military past makes it clear that it is *not* a fair assumption that the next war will be “like” the last war in what *turns out to be* the ways that matter most, which may well *not* be technology or the structure of military organizations. We don't have to look back to the wars of the French Revolution to realize that. Officers of 1949 who looked only at the prior half-century of conflicts would naturally have been less than ideally prepared for the war of limited ends, means, and methods that was about to break out in Korea. American officers of 1964 who focused their attention solely on the Korean War and World Wars would not have been as wise about the war they were about to enter in Vietnam as they could have been had they stretched their historical literacy back to the Philippine Insurrection, or the successful counter-terrorism campaign of Lewis Merrill in South Carolina in 1871–1873, or Winfield Scott's occupation of Mexico in 1847–1848, or Louis Suchet's counterinsurgency in Aragon in 1809–1810 – or, to my point, Edward I's conquest of Wales in the thirteenth century.¹³ That, in a nutshell, is why Howard insisted on the necessity studying military history in *chronological width* and in context, as well as in depth. Those who

¹³ Readers for whom the last-mentioned case seems not to fit with the others should see Clifford J. Rogers, “Giraldus Cambrensis, Edward I, and the Conquest of Wales,” – *Successful Strategies. Triumphant in War and Peace from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2014), 65–99.