

# The Use and Abuse of Military History

by Professor Sir Michael Howard

*This article is based on a lecture by Professor Sir Michael Howard to the Royal United Service Institute on 18 October 1961 and published in their journal, No. 107 in February 1962, p. 4-8.*

*The article was also reprinted in Parameters, Journal of the US Army War College, Vol XI, No. 1, pp. 9-14. It is reprinted here with the permission of the Royal United Service Institute.*

For military historians with backgrounds as professional soldiers, the idea of military history having a “use” is a perfectly natural one. They would hardly have taken to historical studies if they had not held it. But the historian who comes to military studies from academic life may have to overcome a certain inner scepticism about the use that can be made of his studies. This is partly for reasons, [with] which I will deal later, connected with the general nature of academic history as it has developed during the past century. It is due also to a certain fear in academic circles, where military history is liable to be regarded as a handmaid of

wrote with a definite didactic purpose, to awaken emotions of patriotism and loyalty. In totalitarian regimes it is difficult and sometimes impossible to write any other kind of history. Even in mature democracies, subject to very careful qualifications, the “myth,” this selective and heroic view of the past, has its uses. The regimental historian, for instance, has, consciously, or unconsciously, to sustain the view that his regiment has usually been flawlessly brave and efficient, especially during its recent past. Without any sense of ill-doing he will emphasize the glorious episodes in its history and pass with a light hand over its murkier passages, knowing full well that his work is to serve a practical purpose in sustaining regimental morale in the future.

The purist will deny that any purpose, however utilitarian or noble, can justify suppression or selection of this sort, either in regimental histories or in popular military histories. It certainly has some short-term dangers, which are often overlooked, as

---

## *Does military history have any practical value?*

---

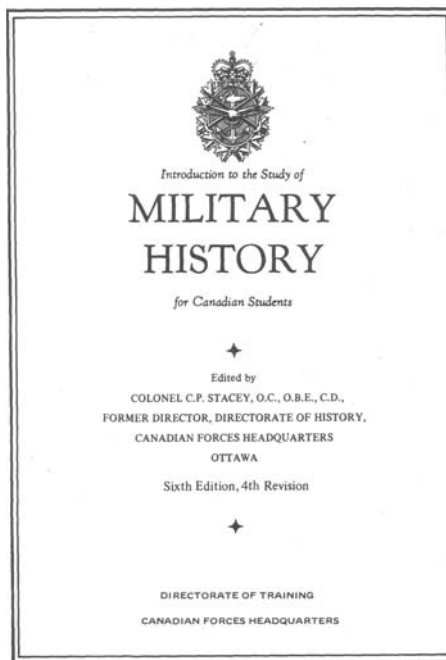
militarism, thus its chief use may be propagandist and “myth-making.” I should like to examine this fear at once, because it is not entirely without a basis of truth.

When I use the term “myth-making,” I mean the creation of an image of the past, through careful selection and interpretation, in order to create or sustain certain emotions or beliefs. Historians have been expected to do this almost since history began to be written at all, in order to encourage patriotic or religious feelings, or to create support for a dynasty or for a political regime. They usually have done so with no sense of professional dishonesty, and much splendid work they have produced in the process. The Tudor chroniclers who described the Middle Ages often did so in order better to set off the glories of their own times. The nationalist historians of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Germany such as Sybel and Treitschke, the maritime and nationalist historians of Victorian England like J. R. Seeley,

well as the moral dangers inseparable from any tampering with the truth. The young soldier in action for the first time may find it impossible to bridge the gap between war as it has been painted and war as it really is—between the way in which he, his peers, his officers, and his subordinates *should* behave, and the way in which they actually do. He may be dangerously unprepared for cowardice and muddle and horror when he actually encounters them, unprepared even for the cumulative attrition of dirt and fatigue. But nevertheless the “myth” can and often does sustain him, even when he knows, with half his mind, that it is untrue. So like Plato I believe that the myth does have a useful social function. I do not consider it to be an “abuse” of military history at all, but something quite different, to be judged by different standards. It is “nursery history,” and I use the phrase without any disparaging implications. Breaking children in properly to the facts of life is a highly skilled affair, as most of you know and the realities of war are

among the most disagreeable facts of life that we are ever called upon to face.

It is in fact the function of the “historian proper” to discover and record what those complicated and disagreeable realities are. He has to find out, as Leopold von Ranke, the father of modern historiography put it, “what really happened.” And this must inevitably involve a critical examination of the “myth,” assessing and discarding its patriotic basis and probing deeply into the things it leaves unsaid. If these investigations reveal that our forces were in fact no braver than the enemy and no more competent than those of our allies, that strokes of apparently brilliant generalship were due to exceptional luck, or that the reputations of wartime commanders were sometimes grossly inflated, this is only to be expected, though the process of disillusionment is necessarily a disagreeable one and often extremely painful. For many of us,



**What do we use military history for and what purpose does it serve us?**

great though our indirect contribution to that overthrow undoubtedly was. Such disillusion is a necessary part of growing up in and belonging to an adult society; and a good definition of the difference between a Western

This brings me back to the question— Does military history have any *practical* value? Here again the academic historian must have his doubts, and those doubts are twofold.

First, the historian should be conscious of the uniqueness of every historical event. “History does not repeat itself,” goes the adage, “historians repeat one another.” The professional historian is concerned rather with establishing differences than with discerning similarities, and he usually shudders at the easy analogies drawn by laymen between Napoleon and Hitler, or Hitler and Khrushchev, or Pitt the Younger and Churchill. He is concerned with events occurring and people living within a certain society, and his task is to explain them in terms of that society. Analogies with events or personalities from other epochs may be illuminating, but equally they mislead; for only certain features in situations at different epochs resemble one another, and

---

***Analogies with events or personalities from other epochs may be illuminating, but equally they mislead.***

---

the “myth” has become so much a part of our world that it is anguish to be deprived of it. I remember my own bitter disillusion on learning that the great English victory over the Armada in 1588 was followed, not by a glorious peace, but (after 16 years) by as dishonourable a compromise settlement as England ever made, and by 20 years during which we were little more than a satellite of the great Spanish Empire. After this it came as less of a shock, on studying the Napoleonic wars from continental sources, to learn how incidental was the part Britain played in the climactic campaigns of 1812, 1813, and 1814 which finally smashed the Napoleonic hegemony of Europe,

liberal society and a totalitarian one—whether it be Communist, Fascist, or Catholic authoritarian—is that in the former the government treats its citizens as responsible adults and in the latter it cannot. It is some sign of this adult quality in our society that our government should have decided that its Official Histories of the Second World War were to be “histories proper,” and not contributions to a national myth. Inevitably the honest historian discovers, and must expose, things which are not compatible with the national myth; but to allow him to do so is necessary, not simply to conform to the values which the war was fought to defend, but to preserve military efficiency for the future.

what is valid in one situation may, because of entirely altered circumstances, be quite untenable the next time it seems to occur. The historian must be always on the alert not to read anachronistic thoughts or motives into the past; and it is here that military historians without academic training are most likely to go astray. Hans Delbruck, perhaps the greatest of modern military historians, shrewdly put his finger on the weaknesses both of the military man who turns to history and of the academic who turns to military affairs. The latter, he pointed out, “labours under the danger of subscribing to an incorrect tradition because he cannot discern its technical

impossibility.” The former “transfers phenomena from contemporary practice to the past, without taking adequate account of the difference in circumstances.”

As an example of an incorrect tradition subscribed to by academics, we may cite the belief, held almost without question until Delbruck himself destroyed it, that the Army with which Xerxes attacked the Greeks in 481 B.C. was two and a half million strong—a clear logistical impossibility. As to anachronistic thinking by soldiers turned historians, it would be invidious to cite by name the many studies, by enormously able soldiers, who attribute to commanders in

historian was “the sifting of the evidence with a view to the establishment of the facts. The second . . . is the attempt to arrange the facts in their connection of cause and effect.” But it does not work out like that. The number of possibly relevant “facts” is infinite. (Are we not hearing constantly fresh evidence about Napoleon’s medical condition, which explains his behaviour at Waterloo?) And the historian’s mind is not a blank sheet of paper, however much he may try to clear his mind of prejudice and preconceptions. He has to start with certain preconceived ideas and he may not be conscious of all of them. He will be interested only in answering certain questions. He

moving in a rational and orderly way, with the principles of war being meticulously illustrated, are an almost blasphemous travesty of the chaotic truth. Some attempt must be made to sort order out of chaos; that is what historians are for. But we would do well, says the sceptical academic, not to take this orderly account even for an approximation to what really happened, much less base any conclusions on it for the future.

All these are good grounds for caution “using” military history. They are good grounds for regarding the tidy dogmatic generalizations of certain staff college crammers as being a monstrous abuse of military history which has gone on far too

---

***The study of military history should also directly improve the officer's competence in his profession.***

---

medieval or 16<sup>th</sup>-century warfare thought-processes which they could have developed only after a long study of Jomini or Mahan, or an intensive course at Camberley or Greenwich, or both. The business of entering into the minds of other generations, of appreciating what Professor Geyl has called “the general otherness of earlier ages,” is difficult and demands long training and wide reading. But the historian who thinks he *has* acquired it may become over-reluctant to admit that different ages and their events can ever profitably be collated or compared, which is, perhaps, no less of an error.

The second ground for doubt of the utility of military history, in the mind of the academic historian, is his awareness that he is studying not what happened in the past, but what historians say happened in the past. Spenser Wilkinson pointed out in his inaugural lecture at Oxford that the first job of the military

imposes his own order on the data before him. To quote Geyl again, he “must use his material by choosing from it, ordering it, and interpreting it. In doing so he is bound to introduce an element of subjectivity...Behind the facts, behind the goddess History, there is a historian.”

This need for selection is particularly great in the case of the military historian, especially when he deals with operations. The evidence is confused and usually contradictory. Eyewitnesses are in no psychological condition to give reliable accounts of their experiences. Loyalty and discretion may result in the suppression of discreditable evidence, especially if all ultimately turns out well. Military historians, more than any other, have to create order out of chaos; and the tidy accounts they give of battles, with generals imposing their will on the battlefield, with neat little blocks an arrows

long. But I do not consider them grounds for regarding military history as useless. Given all these academic caveats, war is nonetheless a distinct and repetitive form of human behaviour. Unlike politics, or administration or economic activity, which are continuing and constantly developing processes, war is intermittent, clearly defined, with distinct criteria of success or failure. We cannot state dogmatically that Britain is better governed, now, or that her economy is more flourishing, than it was in 1761. We can disagree as to whether certain historical events—the Reformation, or the Glorious Revolution, or the Great Reform Act—were triumphs or disasters. The historian of peace can only chronicle and analyze *change*. But the military historian knows what is victory and what defeat, what is success and what failure. When activities do thus constantly recur, and their success can be assessed by a straightforward standard, it does

not seem over-optimistic to assume that we can make judgements about them and draw conclusions which will have an abiding value.

But the academic historian is only one critic of the view that military history may have a use. Yet more formidable is the attack of the practical serving soldier—the man conscious of the technical complexities of profession and understandably impatient of the idea that the experience of Napoleon or Stonewall Jackson can have any relevance to an age of tanks and missiles and machine guns. With his arguments I am far worse equipped to deal. But certain useful things can still be said.

There are two great difficulties with which the professional soldier, sailor, or airman has to contend in equipping himself as a commander. First, his profession is almost unique in that he may have to exercise it only once in a lifetime, if indeed that often. It is as if a surgeon had to practice throughout his life on dummies for one real operation; or a barrister appeared only once or twice in court towards the close of his career; or a professional swimmer had to spend his life practicing on dry land for an Olympic championship on which the fortunes of his entire nation depended. Second, the complex problem of running an army at all is liable to occupy his mind and skill so completely that it is very easy to forget what it is being run *for*. The difficulties encountered in the administration, discipline, maintenance, and supply of an organization the size of a fair-sized town are enough to occupy the senior officer to the exclusion of any thinking about his real business: the conduct of war. It is not surprising that there has often been a high proportion of failures among senior commanders at the beginning of any war. These unfortunate men may either take too long to adjust themselves to reality, through a lack of hard preliminary thinking about what war would really be like, or they may have had their minds so far shaped by a lifetime of



**Canadian infantry mounted on Kangaroo Armoured Personnel Carriers prior Operation Totalize, Normandy, 7 August 1944. Canadian performance in Normandy has been hotly debated over the last several years. Our efforts to learn the truth must be based on evidence and analysis—not on patriotism, widespread assumptions and sweeping generalizations—and that establishing the truth, no matter how unpalatable, is important. (Courtesy Donald E. Graves)**

pure administration that they have ceased for all practical purposes to be soldiers. The advantage enjoyed by sailors in this respect is a very marked one; for nobody commanding a vessel at sea, whether battleship or dinghy is ever wholly at peace.

If there are no wars in the present in which the professional soldier can learn his trade, he is almost compelled to study the wars of the past. For after all allowances have been made for historical differences, wars still resemble each other more than they resemble any other human activity. All are fought, as Clausewitz insisted, in a special element of danger and fear and confusion. In all, large bodies of men are trying to impose their will on one another by violence; and in all, events occur which are inconceivable in any other field of experience. Of course the differences brought about between one war and another by social or technological changes are immense, and an unintelligent study of military history which does not take adequate account of these changes may quite easily be more dangerous than no study at all. Like the statesman, the

soldier has to steer between the danger of repeating the errors of the past because he is ignorant that they have been made, and the danger of remaining bound by theories deduced from past history although changes in conditions have rendered these theories obsolete. We can see, on the one hand, depressingly close analogies between the mistakes made by the British commanders in the Western Desert in their operations against Rommel in 1941 and 1942 and those made by the Austrian commanders against Bonaparte in Italy in 1796 and 1797; experienced, reliable generals commanding courageous and well-equipped troops, but slow in their reactions, obsessed with security, and dispersing their units through fear of running risks. On the other hand, we find the French General Staff both in 1914 and 1939 diligently studying the lessons of “the last time,” and committing appalling strategic and tactical blunders in consequence; conducting operations in 1914 with an offensive ferocity which might have brought victory in 1870 but now resulted in massacre; and in 1939 preparing for the slow, thorough,

yard-by-yard offensive which had been effective at the end of the First World War and now was totally outdated. The lessons of history are never clear. Clio is like the Delphic oracle: it is only in retrospect, and usually too late, that we can understand what she was trying to say.

Three general rules of study must therefore be borne in mind by the officer who studies military history as a guide in his profession and who wishes to avoid its pitfalls.

First, he must study in *width*. He must observe the way in which warfare has developed over a long historical period. Only by seeing what does change can one deduce what does not; and as much can be learned from the great “discontinuities” of military history as from the apparent similarities of the techniques employed by the great captains through the ages. Observe how in 1806 a Prussian army soaked in the traditions of the greatest captain of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Frederick the Great, was nonetheless destroyed; and how the same thing happened in 1870 to a French army brought up in the Napoleonic mould. Consider whether in the conditions of warfare of 1914-18 the careful studies of Napoleon’s or Moltke’s methods, and the attempts to apply them on both sides, were not hopelessly irrelevant; and whether indeed the lessons which Mahan drew from his studies of 18<sup>th</sup>-century naval warfare did not lead our own Admiralty to cling to the doctrine

of the capital fleet for so long that, in the age of the submarine and the aircraft carrier, this country was twice brought within measurable distance of defeat. Knowledge of principles of war must be tempered by a sense of change, and applied with a flexibility of mind which only wide reading can give.

Next he must study in *depth*. He should take a single campaign and explore it thoroughly, not simply from official histories but from memoirs, letters, diaries, even imaginative literature, until the tidy outlines dissolve and he catches a glimpse of the confusion and horror of the real experience. He must get behind the order subsequently imposed by the historian, and recreate by detailed study the omnipresence of chaos, revealing the part played not only by skill and planning and courage, but by sheer good luck. Only thus can he begin to discover, if he is lucky enough not to have experienced it at first hand, what war is really like—“what really happened.”

And lastly, he must study in *context*. Campaigns and battles are not like games of chess or football matches, conducted in total detachment from their environment according to strictly defined rules. Wars are not tactical exercises writ large. They are, as Marxist military analysts quite rightly insist, conflicts of *societies*, and they can be fully understood only if one understands the nature of the society

fighting them. The roots of victory and defeat often have to be sought far from the battlefield, in political, social, and economic factors which explain why armies are constituted as they are, and why their leaders conduct them in the way they do. To explain the collapse of Prussia in 1806 and of France in 1870, we must look deep into their political and social as well as into their military history. Nor can we understand fully the outcome of the First World War without examining the social and political reasons why the Central Powers had so much less staying power than the Western Allies, so that Germany collapsed within a few months of her most sweeping triumphs. Without some such knowledge of the broader background to military operations one is likely to reach to tally erroneous conclusions about their nature, and the reasons for their failure and success. Today, when the military element in the great power struggles of the world is inhibited by mutual fears of the destructive power of the weapons available to both sides, such political and economic factors have an importance such as they have never possessed before; but even in the most apparently formal and limited conflicts of the past they have never been entirely absent.

Pursued in this manner, in width, in depth, and in context, the study of military history should not only enable the civilian to understand the nature of war and its part in shaping society, but also directly improve the officer’s competence in his profession. But it must never be forgotten that the true use of history, military or civil, is, as Jacob Burckhardt once said, not to make men clever for next time; it is to make them wise forever.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Professor Sir Michael Howard’s knowledge of warfare has been gained through experience and study. Having left Oxford to join the Coldstream Guards in 1943, he served in Churchill’s Personal Security Detail before earning a Military Cross at Salerno. He was twice wounded before the end of the war.

After finishing his Oxford degree, Sir Michael joined the Department of History at King’s College London in 1947 and was instrumental in creating both the Department of War Studies and the Centre for Military Archives at the College. In 1964, he became the College’s, and the country’s, first Professor of War Studies. In 1970, he moved to Oxford where he became the Chichele Professor of the History of War and later the Regius Professor of Modern History. He concluded his teaching career at Yale in 1993, as the first Robert A Lovett Professor of Military and Naval History.

