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The Use of Military History

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Abstract

In this presentation to course members at the beginning of the academic year, Sir Michael Howard raised the topic and meaning of military history. This paper therefore conveys concepts central to the study of military history, and military strategy, and it also pays tribute to broader concepts such as the manner and purpose of scholarly enquiry. It establishes how a knowledge of historical events, and undertaking critical historical analysis, can help strategic leaders understand contemporary events and make informed decisions.

This presentation is approximately 2,700 words, and prints off at 9 pages.

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About the author

Professor Sir Michael Howard is an eminent British military historian. He served in the Coldstream Guards during World War II, and won a Military Cross at Salerno. He has held numerous prestigious positions at British universities, created the Department of War Studies at Kings College, and is one of the founders of the International Institute for Strategic Studies. He is best known for expanding military history into a broader appreciation about the sociological significance of war, and was the leading interpreter of the writings of Carl von Clausewitz in the late 20th century.

The Use of Military History

Before I begin, I wish to make two apologies: First, I shall be talking mainly about land warfare; and second I shall often refer to the military historian as 'he'. I know that both are inadequate.

To begin; 'military history' has two meanings.

The first is as a *History of War*. This is a vast subject, embracing almost the whole of human history, which is important for everyone to understand.

The second is as an *Operational History.* This is the deployment and use of military forces, which is of specific value to professionals like yourselves. That is basically what I shall be talking about in this presentation.

Operational history is not only of specific value to the military, it is essential to it, for one simple reason. All other professions are continuous. The doctor, the lawyer, the business-man are continuously employed. The experience of their profession is on-going in that they can see what is happening, as well as what has happened. The experience of the soldier is intermittent; therefore he must look at the past to see what works and what does not. People complain that generals prepare to fight the last war, but the last war provides the only firm data that they have.

Although the nature of war changes – and I shall talk about that in a moment - all wars have more in common with one another than they have with any other human activity. Only in war are people legitimately engaged in killing one another in a conflict in which the fear or actuality of death is the ultimate sanction. That makes it a very special activity. As Clausewitz pointed out – and it is this more than anything else he said that makes him a great historian – war takes place in a distinctive element of *danger*, which shapes, or distorts, all other activity. It is the business of the military to terrify and if necessary kill the enemy, and to function efficiently in spite of themselves being terrified. Therefore, at the heart of all war, however limited its aim, there lies extreme violence.

Any operational history that does not recognise this is not worth the paper it is written on. *War is not fun.* It is not a game. Neither is it a bloodless intellectual exercise. As Sherman said, 'war is hell'; and the reams of works on military history that fill the book-stores and pretend that it is anything else are not worth the paper they are written on. It is certainly an abuse of military history to regard it as light entertainment. Much of it may be readable and interesting, but very little of it is of any *use*.

This is partly because good operational history is extraordinarily difficult to write. I cut my teeth over fifty years ago by trying to write the most basic of all, a regimental history in which I had to find out what had happened to a number of infantry and

armoured battalions in action in Europe and the Middle East during the Second World War, some of which I had taken part in. It was the toughest thing I have ever done. I thought I knew what had happened at least to me, but I learned the first rule for any historian: never trust an eye witness; least of all himself. The human memory is totally unreliable. At the centre of all fighting lies what Clausewitz termed 'the engagement' and at the centre of all engagements lies utter confusion. Wellington put it in a civilised way when he said that one can no more describe a battle than one can describe a ball; too much going on, people too excited, frightened or confused to give accurate accounts.

But if the first rule is never to trust an eye-witness, the second is to be sceptical of written records. Written records tend to describe what should have happened, not what did happen. Even the most immediate accounts will have been written down afterwards. The situation has probably been improved by electronic communications which do leave an immediate record, but of those I cannot personally speak. However, I suspect that they may provide a barely manageable flow of information that creates more problems than it solves.

The third rule, especially for people such as regimental historians, is do not be surprised, shocked, or censorious, if even the best troops do not live up to expectations – and armies are not composed of the best troops. Almost anyone who has experienced war will have seen things that they prefer not to remember, much less record. However, if they do not record them it is impossible to know what war is really *like*; and to describe *what it is like* is the first duty of the operational historian. The first duty of any historian is not to his unit or even his country, but to the truth.

If the operational historian is to create an understandable narrative, he has to start by describing the plans of the High Command and show what measures it adopted to implement them, then work down to events at the sharp end where the actual fighting is taking place. But at the same time he must be at the sharp end the whole time, and never lose touch with it. That is why I think that one of the greatest operational historians who has ever written is your own Charles Bean, whose work you probably know better than I do. At least you should do.

Bean was an 'embedded' historian, living among the troops and describing how they lived, what they actually did or occasionally failed to do, and how the plans of the generals translated into action. His account of Gallipoli is of course classic, but so, and of far wider interest, is his history of the Australian forces on the Western Front. He describes not only what the war was like, but why it was like that; what the troops were expected to do, how they did it or failed to do it, how the High Command took their experience on board, adjusted their plans accordingly, and ultimately how the

war was won. It was an account of an army *learning on the job,* which is what armies have to do in any armed conflict. They start with the incomplete knowledge they have brought from the past, and then improve it to deal with new and unforeseen –usually unforeseeable - circumstances. The side that learns fastest on the job is the one that usually wins.

It is important to understand when operational history is useful and when it is not, and for guidance on this we must consult the historian of war. The historian of war will show how the conduct of war varies with different periods and different cultures. In Europe before the mid-17th century it was a very confused affair hardly discernable from peace. Armies were barely controlled by their rulers, and were more concerned with plunder than with fighting.

Then around 1650 a new era began that lasted for two centuries. This saw the development of organised states capable of raising, paying, and controlling professional armies. Governments could control the conduct of war and enforce the preservation of peace.

Between 1650 and 1850 the conduct of war changed very little. Armies were small professional bodies, their size limited by economic and supply problems. Their weapons did not change much; infantry armed with muskets and bayonets, artillery with smooth-bore cannon, cavalry with sabres or lances. Lines of supply ran over very bad roads, troops had to live very largely off the country. So what worked in the time of Marlborough was likely to work fifty years later for Frederick the Great, or fifty years later for Napoleon. Regularities emerged that became established as 'Principles of War', and if you studied the campaigns of the great generals you could not go far wrong. The study of operational history was thus of immediate value, and departments were set up in staff colleges to teach it. In 1900 European staff officers were still studying the campaigns of Napoleon, Wellington, and Frederick the Great, as guides to making war in the twentieth century.

But around 1850 things had begun to change, and the historian of war has to explain how and why.

In one of the great transformations of human history, western societies were ceasing to be agrarian, based on cultivation of the soil, and becoming industrial, their economies based initially on coal and iron but increasingly on science-based industries that produced new forms of civil organisation and new forms of weapons. And as societies became transformed, so did their means of waging war. Railways abolished all limits to the size of armies that could be deployed and sustained in the field; from being small bodies of professionals, they became 'nations in arms'. Telegraph and telephone hugely extended the range of command. Rifled firearms transformed both infantry

and artillery and made cavalry obsolete. When war came in 1914, very little of the military history taught in European staff colleges proved relevant. The American Civil War was too remote and its lessons too ambiguous to be of much interest, and the 'lessons' of the most recent war, that between Russia and Japan ten years earlier, taught that victory could be attained only at the price of heavy casualties. So for the next five years belligerent armies had to learn on the job; which they did at a cost that, arguably, destroyed European civilization.

After 1918 the operational history of the First World War attracted little popular attention. It was too complicated and depressing - with the notable exception of Gallipoli. From the latter the main lesson drawn was do not do it again (and don't ever again put Australian troops under command of the bloody Poms!) The British army felt that if there was another war in Europe they had better leave it to the French, and did not even begin to study the operational lessons of the Western Front until 1933. The French primarily remembered Verdun, which taught them to rely on the strength of the defensive and let the Germans batter themselves to death against the Maginot Line.

But the Germans knew that the offensive *could* work. The experience of 1918 proved it, when their own spring offensive had very nearly defeated the Allies, although a few months later the Allied counter-offensive had won the war. So they studied the operational history of the war, especially of its last months, in great detail: their own use of storm troops and successful techniques of infantry-artillery co-operation; the British use of armoured warfare; and the use of air-power as a battlefield weapon. They learned how to use radio-communications to link it all up. In short they used operational history as it should be used, not as a record of the past to be imitated, but as a data-base to be used intelligently and constructively. They *interrogated* the historians; what went wrong, they asked, and how can we put it right? What went right, and how can we improve on it? And if the operational historians were to be of any use, it was more important than ever that they should provide detailed and accurate information.

In 1940 the Germans used operational history to formidable effect. Fortunately the English Channel stopped them from getting too far to the west, and Russian space exhausted them in the east, so the Allies were able again to learn on the job. However, it must be said that we gained victory less through superior military skill than from massive superiority of man-power in the east and fire-power in the west.

What about the Far East? Well, all I can say for the moment is that the Japanese had learned from western naval history about command of the sea, and from western air-power theorists about command of the air. Once they had acquired both, there was

little that anyone could do to stop them until they reached their logistical limits. So there too we had to learn on the job, which was a horribly expensive affair.

So was the history of the Second World War of any use to practitioners? Yes, but only up to a point. The historians provided a mass of data about amphibious warfare which should have been very useful for the Suez campaign. Unfortunately Suez was the wrong kind of war, requiring 'smash and grab' techniques rather than the elaborate preparations of the Normandy landings. The experience of land war in Europe provided a mass of data that would have been useful for both sides if the Soviets had ever attacked NATO and neither side had used nuclear weapons. But since they did not, and since weapons-systems have been transformed over the past fifty years by what has been called 'The Revolution in Military Affairs', that data is now of limited value. But the Second World War still remains all that we have got, and it still comes in handy for limited conflicts such as that we initiated five years ago against Iraq.

Which brings us to our own day.

The Iraq war and its aftermath have made it clear that we have moved into a new era of warfare; one as different from the wars between industrial states of the 20th century as those were from wars between agrarian states in the 18th century. To explain the causes of this transition would demand another lecture, and certainly a different lecturer. But the effect has been twofold.

First, wars are no longer fought simply between states. States no longer have a monopoly of violence. The belligerents are as likely as not to be 'non-state actors', armed groups who may or may not have state support.

Secondly, wars are no longer fought for *the control of territory*. They are struggles for *the support of the peoples inhabiting that territory*. For guidance we must look not so much to Clausewitz as to Mao Zedong. And although these certainly involve 'operational history' they involve a great deal more as well – social, political, even intellectual, history. A study of purely military operations may leave us as puzzled as those French generals who complained that they had won all their battles against the Algerian rebels but lost the war.

The historian of war will explain how these conflicts originated in European revolutionary movements in the 19th century, which invented the tool of what today we call 'terrorism'. Then in the first half of the twentieth century they extended to anti-colonial rebellions. These were against the British in India, Ireland and Palestine, in China against the Japanese occupation, and in Algeria and Vietnam against the French. Finally, it was the Vietnamese against the Americans. After the disappearance of the old European Empires there came internal conflicts between ethnic or religious

groups, not only in Africa and the Middle East but in Europe, in the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union. Finally they have broadened out into a global *jihad*, basically for the control of South-West Asia, but aiming, so far as some of its members are concerned, at the total subversion of western capitalist society.

Some people are reluctant to call this a war at all, but it is hard to know what else to call it. Certainly the historian of war has to deal with it. After all, it has at its centre the use of violence to achieve political ends, and those who instigate it call it a war. It also involves military operations of a small but intensive kind, so we need the operational historian as well. But even more it involves police activities (such as the British Army in Northern Ireland), humanitarian activities, 'nation-building', and constant political activity. We can tell the story of the Second World War, and most wars before it, almost entirely in terms of military operations by land, sea and air. We cannot do that if we are to describe what is happening today in Iraq and Afghanistan, or happened recently in Northern Ireland or Yugoslavia. The operational historian will at best be part of a team; the operations he describes and analyses will make no sense unless they are seen in a wider political and social context.

It will no longer be enough for the military to study operational history. If you are to understand your enemy, and how best to fight him, you must study the whole of his history.

Therefore, I suppose I might sum up by suggesting that the tactician must study operational history; whereas the strategist must study the history of war.