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4.
Armies and Military History in a Post-Military Age

Few professions have undergone such a sudden change in the last dozen years as the profession of arms. Military history, which follows in its wake, is only just starting to feel the direct and indirect effects of the same multi-faceted revolution – social, technological, economic and above all geo-political – which began in the mid-1980s. It may not seem so momentous, now that we are becoming accustomed to its effects, but historians of the future are going to be obsessed with the end of the 20th Century.

For a start, this combination of changes appears to constitute the first revolution in history to be neither religious, nor primarily ideological in origin. Unlike the revolutions of the past, which appealed to some sort of religious or political ideals and self-sacrifice, this one is motivated mainly by self-interest — the very element which sapped or destroyed revolutionary regimes in the past. But we should be very cautious on this as yet speculative assessment, especially when one thinks of Chou-en-Lai's comment on the French Revolution, that we are too close in time to judge. It will take many years before we can tell for sure whether the astonishing changes in the course of less than a decade – economic Big Bang, the sudden collapse of Communism, the invention of the internet and the leap in communications, the fragmentation of society, globalisation, the collapse of collective values and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism – were intrinsically connected or purely coincidental.

Britain seems to have been more affected by the shock of this global revolution than many other countries. Unlike those nations in Europe, which underwent political revolutions during the 19th Century and the first half of the 20th Century, Britain's traditional social structure remained remarkably intact. Partly because of the strait-jacket effect of the Cold War, British society changed astonishingly little between 1945 and the mid-1980s, when the Thatcher government dramatically accelerated the process of change, It took a course, however, which the Thatcherites themselves failed to foresee. Mrs Thatcher was replaced by John Major, who tried to soften the hard individualist edge with the rhetoric of citizenship – the Citizen's Charter, the Repeal of Crown

Immunity and so forth. Some of these changes came through pressure from Brussels, but not the initial impetus. The new emphasis, to the dismay of the Conservative Party itself, began to turn conventional assumptions upside down. Notions of duty and loyalty to the state were reversed, before anyone anyone fully realised the implications. And it happened without any real debate.

The armed forces were particularly vulnerable to the suddenness of change, because of their innate social conservatism. To their horror, they found that they were losing control over their recruitment and selection process. As the most conspicuous representatives of the state, the Army, Navy and Air Force were forced to accept the new idea that all citizens – including sexual and ethnic minorities – had an equal right to serve, and that this took precedence over the Services' right to select. In a very short space of time, they found that the equal opportunites lobbies had identified them as the commanding heights of the employment sector, and if they could force the services to introduce the new recruitment principle, then it could be applied everywhere. There were even calls for the disabled to be given employment rights in the armed services. I heard a story last year – and I am still not sure whether it was apocryphal or true – of a brigadier from the Ministry of Defence almost foaming at the mouth when asked by a parliamentary committee on the disabled why it was not possible to provide wheelchair access to tanks.

The other great change was the new readiness of soldiers to seek redress of grievances, not through the chain of command, but through the press and even the law courts. Recruits who leave prematurely can allege discrimination in some form, whether against the physically challenged, the mentally challenged, even the cosmetically challenged, since an unflattering remark from their drill sergeant about their appearance may be enough to bring a claim for emotional injury. Individuals aggrieved by a decision not to promote them, can bring a case. And we now see single soldiers bringing actions if they are refused a married quarter to live in with their girlfriend. The problem is that not even a team of Q.C.s revising every article in the Manual of Military Law and Queen's Regulations could be certain of making them watertight. In fact, the basic system of military justice came under attack from a group of appeals to the European Court in an attempt to have courts martial declared unjust.

Such changes have naturally affected the traditional conduct of military life and its priorities. And it is well worth having a look at the process before we move on to the influence on military history.

During the 1960s — that period of student rebellion, protests against the Vietnam War and alternative lifestyles — the British Army remained singularly untouched by the outside world. When dancing in the

disco at regimental balls, young officers sang about wearing a flower in their hair if going to San Francisco, but the whole hippy idea was a faraway joke. They continued to live in a self-contained society, virtually impervious to the fads and political fashions of the rest of the country outside.

The year 1970, however, saw the introduction of new salary structures and married quarters made available on a much wider basis for junior ranks. Little thought was paid to the longer-term effects. To maintain recruiting, the Army had to compete with civilian employers. Any suggestion that social issues might one day affect recruiting, training, promotion and even deployment was considered ridiculous.

During the 1970s, the huge demands of Northern Ireland meant that training was restructured in packages, with far higher turnovers. The Army suddenly became far more professional, taking on an increasing proportion of graduates. Yet the influx of graduates had a much deeper effect than ever imagined at the time. Graduates were more career-conscious and they tended to keep in closer touch with their civilian contemporaries. The British Army started to lose much of the cultural isolation which had been its largely self-imposed lot until then.

Throughout the 1970s and right into the first half of the 1980s, one inconsistency seems to have received very little attention. The Army was modernising almost all of its professional practices, but little attempt was made to reassess the corresponding effect on cultural and moral values. Even as late as 1988 and 1989, many senior officers were still arguing that it was the duty of the armed forces to remain half a generation behind civilian society.

It must not be forgotten that the British Army, which evolved from a regimental base, with gentlemen buying officers' commissions, was basically an amateur organisation with an increasingly professional system grafted on to it. So the sudden modernisation experienced in less than two decades, without a corresponding shift in social values, was bound to create internal strains, to say nothing of external contradictions with the society from which its personnel came.

The question of mutual trust and collective values lay at the heart of the culture shock which hit the Army in the second half of the 1980s. The institutions which had sailed untouched through the so-called revolutionary 1960s found themselves shaken by an utterly different ethos. A new generation was joining, with little sympathy for tradition or convention.

In the eyes of younger officers, the unit was no longer a surrogate family, and Service life was no longer a vocation. It was just another career. And like any other career, it had to deliver. Civilian influences reached every aspect. Best business practices began to be imposed in the

mid-1980s. The very phrase 'Human Resources' was likely to set any self-respecting officer's teeth on edge. Managing 'human resources' was, to his mind, just business-speak for leadership. One general remarked to me on the then government's obsession with bar charts and performance ratings. 'How the bloody hell are we supposed to measure our effectiveness?' he demanded contemptuously. 'By the number of people we kill?' But in the course of the last decade, nobody in a position of responsibility within the armed forces remained under any illusions. With the ending of the Cold War, the ground has shifted under their feet. It was no longer the Barbarians at the gates, but the civilians.

The traditional respect for authority crumbled rapidly at the same time, producing what many described as the 'non-deferential society'. The young had little idea of following orders through a chain of command, or recognized the need for absolute obedience at critical moments in battle. The Army was seen as little different to any other organisation, largely because civilians were no longer accustomed to the idea of 'life-and-death decisions'.

These are some of the social changes, but let us also look back briefly at the evolution of operational changes. After the murderous excesses of the Thirty Years War, whose religious fanaticism provided a striking foretaste of the total warfare of the Second World War, came what might be called the princely, or *ancien regime*, era of warfare which evolved in the century following the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Campaigning was limited and ritualised to an extraordinary degree. Armies marched and counter-marched in chess-like manoeuvres. Towns were besieged and then surrendered with due ceremony. Prisoners were exchanged and a peace treaty at the end ceded a province or a small principality. In those days before income tax, state revenues were small and soldiers, many of them imported mercenaries, were very expensive. It is no surprise therefore, that generals tried, but did not always succeed, to avoid bloodbaths.

The American revolution in the 1770s — a civil war as well as the first anti-colonial struggle, it must be remembered — first exemplified the idea of patriotic and idealistic warfare. The French revolutionary war took the process further and introduced the levée en masse, the beginning of conscription. French peasant society, with many children and limited land, provided the initial reservoir of cannon fodder for mass conscripted armies. But by 1914, the swollen cities, at a time of rapidly rising population, also provided their share of 'disposable sons', in Edward Luttwak's phrase, for mass warfare. This age of vast conscripted armies continued right through the First and Second World Wars. It did not

finally come to an end until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and there are some vestigial remains even today in a number of countries.

The ending of the Cold War produced an optimistic re-examination of military needs and identity. Everyone started to speak of the 'Peace Dividend'. Yet few people saw that the Cold War had been keeping the world in splints for nearly half a century, and when these suddenly fell away, national and ethnic hatreds would begin to resurface. Ethnic cleansing by para-military groups in the former Yugoslavia shocked the West. NATO armies found themselves in the world of the so-called 'CNN curve' – of the something-must-be-done syndrome. In more official language, this was defined as 'armed humanitarianism' in the UN Security Council resolution 794 of December 1992.

Whether or not 'armed humanitarianism' works at it was supposed to — Somalia, Bosnia and Kosovo are not entirely encouraging examples — it has at least provoked intense discussion on the new role of the soldier in the 21st Century. Edward Luttwak compared the future role of peace-enforcers to those of heavily armoured Roman legionaries in outposts along the frontiers of the civilised world. This, however, perhaps revealed more about the American attitude to peace-enforcement at the end of the 20th Century: a high-tech/low-bodybag arms-length operation, more often than not conducted with the use of air power. This attempt to police the world from the air is not only morally questionable — as General Morillon said just as the ultimatum over Kosovo expired: 'Who are these soldiers who are prepared to kill, but are not prepared to be killed?' — it is also far more dangerous in the long term. The smart bomb of today is likely to be answered by the terrorist or suicide bomber of tomorrow.

The British Army view is rather more robust, and ground-orientated than that of the United States. It is also rather more down-to-earth in other ways. The British Army doctrine on the subject maintains that NATO forces should never be deployed unless there is a clear demand from a majority of the local population for their intervention. For example, events in East Timor showed what a well-trained and well-disciplined body of troops can achieve in saving a civilian society from appalling treatment by para-military gangs. Sierra Leone is another example. But can just a few advanced nations police the rest of the world on an ad-hoc basis?

Few army commanders are gung-ho today. They know that getting out of a peace-enforcement operation is far harder than going in. The president of the French senate's armed forces committee remarked, only half-jokingly: 'The problem today is that it is the generals who are the pacifists.'

We are living in a world not just of ethnic conflict, but also one in which drug barons or mafia-style gangs, often working hand-in-hand with corrupt politicians or generals, can take over a small or vulnerable country. So, what sort of soldier is needed in this post-Cold War world? A conflict resolution counsellor in a blue beret, or the soldier of more conventional wars?

The truth, as events in Bosnia showed all too cruelly, is a decidedly illiberal one. Tyrants and ethnic cleansers do not respond to reasoned argument or appeals to better natures. There is only one thing that the bully responds to and that is to superior force. The lesson was finally learned after the Sarajevo killings and the Srebrinica massacre. It is not white Toyotas and UN flags that you need, but war-fighting troops with armoured fighting vehicles. If politicians are not prepared to deploy them properly, then they must ignore the CNN-curve of media clamour to intervene to save ethnic or religious minorities, and they must explain why our forces cannot become involved. The trouble is of course, that western governments will never be honest about it. Most are too afraid of the media.

The whole area of post-Cold War intervention is of course morally and legally confused. International law has always respected national sovereignty, but now, without any clear change in law, attempts are being made to impose a new international political morality based on western democratic values and human rights. Unfortunately, the United Nations is reluctant to face up to the debate because rather too many of its own members have terrible human rights records themselves.

The armies which have to implement these policies are also in a state of flux. They are having to conform to new politically correct ideas which do not sit easily with traditional military values, which naturally tend to be retrospective, because war and the preparation for war is intimately linked to atavistic qualities. For example, the tribal instincts of the fighting group resist the introduction of perceived outsiders, such as women and gays.

There is also the need to suppress individual fear. This is not merely macho posturing, it is in fact vital. An army has to prevent the most contagious and destructive emotion of all from spreading. Many practices, which may look ridiculous or grotesque to the outsider are usually a method of controlling fear, both individual and collective. Drill evolved in this way, and it still has its uses because a degree of conditioning is necessary. In the moment of crisis, a soldier is more likely to react to the familiar bellow of a sergeant if he should be frozen in fear, than to the comforting words of a therapist. Even modern weapon training employs basic drill techniques. It has to drum in the sequence of actions to clear a stoppage on a machine gun, which a soldier in a state of fear

may so easily forget. In his panic he has to be able to fall back on a process which has become second-nature.

It may appear a paradox in post-Cold War democracies that we should still need to train young men, and now women, to fight. But we certainly do. In fact, one might well argue that the day the British soldier becomes a model of caring citizenship is the day that he can no longer be counted on to hold the pass against the thug and tyrant.

These developments may prove a far greater problem than we can yet assess, both operationally and socially. From an operational point of view, there is a strong possibility that the true experience of war after all the electronic gadgetry, both in official training simulators as well as in the amusement arcade, may be even more disorientating and shocking than at present. There is emotional, as well as operational, chaos when sophisticated systems fail.

The fantasy diet of the film industry has also led the younger generation to believe that it can have incredible adventures without real physical danger. The popular press, meanwhile, has encouraged people to believe that we should be masters of our destiny, and that if anything goes wrong, somebody else must be responsible. We live in an age when people and governments believe that anything hazardous, from food poisoning to sport should be controlled. Yet the Army has to recruit and train for the most unpredictable and dangerous of all occupations.

The point of underlining these changes, is to emphasize the widening gap between civilian perception and military reality over the last twenty years. This is vital when we look at the problems of military history now and in the future. But first of all, how has it changed over the last two decades?

The subject of military history always fascinated me at school back in the early 1960s, yet there seemed to be a strange contradiction in the way that it was written then, especially by retired generals. Battlefields were described as if they were chess boards, with formations pushed from position to position like chess pieces. Yet any eye-witness description showed the conditions to be utterly chaotic. I studied military history at Sandhurst under John Keegan. His book, *The Face of Battle*, sought to recreate the real experience of soldiers in the front line, and it influenced me greatly. I sensed then that this showed the way, even if I was not yet sure of the direction in which it led.

The old-fashioned method of writing history produced what one might call collective history – the history of a nation or an army, a division or a regiment. This, like the movement of military symbols with arrows on maps, dehumanised the reality of what was happening on the ground. Then, in the 1980s, during that period I have just been talking

about, when traditonal society fragmented, and individualism replaced the concepts of collective loyalty and duty, tastes in history itself began to change. A considerable vogue arose in Britain and the United States for books of oral history, often consisting of collections of interviews and letters. There were some outstanding works, such as Studs Terkel's *The Good War* and Ronald Fraser's *The Blood of Spain*. But much of the material was repetitive and frankly of more use to other historians than to the general reader. The formula of setting the scene with just linking passages was clearly unsatisfactory.

The simple answer seemed to be that one should merge the stuff of oral history into narrative history. But that alone was not enough. There was a far more important reason to combine history from above with history from below. It is the only effective way to show the true consequences of a leader's decision. In the case of the Eastern Front during the Second World War, you need to cut from conferences in the Kremlin or in the Führerbunker to the reality on the ground to show the true effect of either brutal or demented decision-making. For example, it is at times very hard to distinguish the Nazis' total lack of humanity from their unbelievable irresponsibility, often stemming from their vain lies and self-delusion.

The best way to show this is to quote from their reports and instructions in the archives on the tragic disaster of 8.5 million refugees fleeing from the vengeance of the Red Army in January and February 1945, and then to describe the reality on the ground, using personal diaries, letters and other eyewitness reports. In Germany itself, thousands of refugees were left to freeze and starve by the train-load in cattle and coal wagons, just like concentration camp prisoners. This was mainly because local Nazi officials did not want the refugees to pass on diseases. In some cases they simply shirked the responsibility of looking after them and sent them further on down the line. 'These people found themselves in a terrible state', a senior Nazi party official in Schleswig-Holstein reported to Berlin. 'They were infested with lice and suffered from many illnesses such as scabies and so on. Also those who died during the long journey were still in the wagons. Often the trains were not off-loaded at their destination, but sent on to another Gau [or district]. Apart from that everything in Schleswig-Holstein is in order.' So much for the Nazis' vaunted *Volksgenossenschaft*.

A major reason for the recent boom in interest in history comes precisely because history books and television documentaries are providing details at last on the fate of ordinary individuals, not just of political leaders and commanders.

It must be said that this change has not always been a beneficial development. In many cases, the teachers' training college idea of

popular approaches to history has probably done as much harm as good. Robert Skidelsky at a round-table discussion emphasised the disaster of history teaching today, with pupils asked to do 'empathy exercises' — along the lines of 'Imagine what it was like to be a soldier in the First World War'. How can anyone, let alone a child, imagine such an experience when they have no knowledge, no basis for comparison? They can only resort to the images they have seen on televison or in films. John Keegan was also there, and it made me think that it was like asking somebody to write his book, *The Face of Battle*, without having done any research. Brian Bond has pointed out that: 'Some schools are now using *Blackadder goes Forth* as the main text for study of the First World War at GCSE level.'

But there is another pernicious consequence of this sort of education. It is the attempt to impose late twentieth century civilian values on an earlier period. Norman Davies defined this as 'psycho-anachronism'.

The problem is not limited just to schoolteachers trained on dubious educational theory. Some academics seem to have adopted an almost deliberate policy of attempting to analyse the conduct of soldiers in the past without attempting to step into their shoes. I strongly believe that one cannot make either moral or historical judgements until one understands, as far as is possible, what soldiers on both sides, endured, felt and thought. This, unfortunately, may become increasingly difficult in the future. Unlike the John Ericksons and Michael Howards, fewer and fewer historians have any experience of military life, and some of them instinctively disapprove of the very profession of soldiering. That is fine, but a historian is bound to make serious errors of interpretation if he or she does not really understand what makes an army tick.

Warfare, more than any almost any other subject, defies all-embracing theories. The variables in conditions and circumstances — cultural, geographical, physical, psychological — lay traps for almost every generalisation. This should not be surprising. War — and above all modern war — creates the most volatile and highly emotive state known to humanity.

In Western universities during the post-Cold War age, this controversial subject as a whole is attracting outsiders to an unprecedented extent. One might even say, to paraphrase Clemenceau, that war is now seen as much too important a question to be left to military historians. Sociologists, anthropologists and cultural historians are all joining in. Some are scrupulous in their background research and make a determined effort to overcome their lack of familiarity with the subject. Others try to apply a particular theory while failing to understand armies or the true nature of war. This, I suppose, is the inevitable

drawback to what one might term single-issue history. Richard Overy, in a recent critique of a history of the Second World War by a cultural historian, rightly acknowledged the importance of outsiders stirring up what he called 'the league of military historians', but he also added that 'Cultural historians who choose to talk about subjects military have much to learn from the historians of battles, strategy and weapons.'

Paradoxically, yet significantly, one tends to find that those who make the greatest claims to scientific rigour in their methodology often turn out to be less than objective in practice. I am thinking particularly of a mechanistic tendency within the sociological school, typefied by those who try to reach conclusions on the conduct of German forces on the Eastern Front by a demographic analysis of officers and soldiers.

This approach — a method which sometimes appears rather like an archaeological version of the opinion poll — is essentially one dimensional. The idea of taking limited samples, whether individual German divisions in one case, or even a single police battalion, and then extrapolating from profile analysis into sweeping judgements is deeply flawed and potentially dangerous. The particular, through a lack of understanding of the general, is bound to be distorted in this process, especially if the historian in question has strong political beliefs or personal feelings on the subject. For example, a historian attempting to analyse the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front might think that ordinary officers were actively involved in the indoctrination of their men because they supplied them with Nazi-controlled newspapers. But all publications in Germany were Nazi controlled. And German officers who did their best to obtain papers for their men were not necessarily any different to conscientious officers in other armies who did their best to obtain newspapers because it was good for morale.

It is even more important to accept that history as a subject can never be an exact science with verifiable results like chemistry or physics. The point is that history is bound to owe more to literature, with all its human fallibilities. Historical evidence is seldom comparable to that studied in laboratory conditions, yet some historians talk of analysis as if they were wearing white coats and bending over a microscope. History is, virtually by definition, a matter of differing selection and emphasis. Even leaving aside the question of personal selection, historians cannot present an objective account, even if they were to include every fact known, because there are always gaps in our knowledge. All that historians should hope to do is to understand the period as best they can, and to push forward the barriers of knowledge within a proper context.

Raul Hilberg, the American author of the greatest study of the Holocaust, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, a work he has been constantly updating since its first appearance in 1961, has rightly argued

that the subject must be treated like all other historical events and periods, whether the French Revolution or peasant daily life in the Black Forest during the seventeenth century. The same rules of objectivity must be observed. Such views, have not of course made Hilberg popular in German academic circles, where the notion of the uniqueness of the Holocaust became the banner of younger German historians during the *Historikerstreit*.

Hilberg believes that historians should restrict themselves to the role of a pathologist. His greatest scorn is reserved for those who confuse the study of history with an attempt to apply retrospective moral judgement or who try to impose an ideological framework. He has attacked Daniel Goldhagen in particular for 'sacrificing facts to his thesis'.

I do not think that it is excessively cynical to be on one's guard every time a historian protests in an introduction at how astonished he or she was by what their search revealed. In the case of controversial books, such a claim is often blatantly disingenuous.

Richard Overy was right to welcome the recent involvement of outsiders in the military history debate. The great advantage of their contribution is to break down barriers, unlike on the Continent. The German historical establishment, and to a certain degree the French, remain resolutely opposed to a multi-disciplinary approach. The idea of mixing political, social and military history is anathema to them. Unlike the British tradition, they prefer a modular approach.

The other area of debate in this country and the United States, is the degree to which soldiers become addicted to violence and to killing in war. Perhaps the only thing that is certain here is the difficulty of studying the subject. There are a number of aspects which of course can be examined — the national military cultures of the forces involved, the circumstances and geography of the conflict and so on. But when it comes down to it, the pattern of violence in war is seldom predictable. 'It's funny', said one American veteran of World War II, 'one minute you want to kill a guy and the next you don't.' Numerous accounts on both sides on the Eastern Front support this.

One can still only speculate on the origins of violent excitement, and addiction to it. A sexual origin would strongly suggest a link to testosterone. And although there can be little doubt that some men reveal a form of sexual arousal connected to violence and killing, they certainly do not appear to be more than a small minority.

One area which might well be interesting for further research is the whole question of noradrenalin. You may remember the furore in the 1980s when Erin Pizzey voiced the theory that perhaps battered women

returned to violent husbands because the reaction of their bodies to prolonged fear had created a form of noradrenalin addiction. I regret that I have not been able to find out if further research has been done in this area, but I would not be surprised if one found a direct relevance to military life. The phenomenon of former members of special forces being unable to come to terms with daily life after the fear and tension of operational existence is well known. Coping with the 'downer' when operations are over, can be almost akin to cold turkey. But the point is that fear appears to be the main addictive component.

Fear – both the control of fear and the manipulation of fear – must be a central element on the study of military affairs as is indicated by the most violent and murderous of all modern campaigns, the launch of Operation Barbarossa in the summer of 1941. Some historians of the Eastern Front, such as Omer Bartov, lay a heavy emphasis on the conditioning of young German soldiers to hate 'Bolsheviks and Jews'. He is, of course, right, but he is in a way only half right. It was not just the incitement to hatred of Slav, Communist and Jew which turned the German invasion into such a terrible war, it was the combination of hatred *and fear*. The most devastating effect of Nazi propaganada was not the racial and political hatred and arrogance, it was the fears it deliberately created and exploited in the hearts of the German population. So amid all the confusion of war, there is one thing of which I think we can be reasonably sure: while hatred is the explosive, fear is the detonator of violence. It may well also be, as I said, the key component in addiction to violence.

Joanna Bourke, in her book *An Intimate History of Killing*, describes bayonet practice in World War One. The language used in pamphlets, which she quotes, was almost ludicrously bloodthirsty. Yet, as Bourke herself acknowledges, only a tiny percentage of casualties in the First World War, and even tinier percentages in World War Two and Vietnam were ever inflicted with the bayonet. So why did armies go on fixing bayonets and training to kill with them, especially when the bayonet is far from the best weapon in close-quarter combat? The answer is very simple. The bayonet is a sort of talisman to provide artificial courage for a soldier afraid that he might run out of ammunition, or that his weapon might jam leaving him defenceless. The whole process of bayonet training, with blood-curdling yells and stabbing at a sand-bag stuffed with straw, is not agression training for its own sake, but a form of courage-booster.

Such training is easy to satirise, and uninformed anti-militarism has also had a profound effect on popular perceptions of the subject. Like the much more recent *Blackadder,* Joan Littlewood's *Oh, what a lovely war!*

was brilliant entertainment, but the depiction of the subject by anti-war sceptics, does not of course make for good history.

One thing we cannot complain about at any rate, is a lack of interest in the subject. Back in 1995, many people, and I was one of them, expected all interest in the Second World War to collapse following the 50th anniversary of VE Day. Huge numbrs of books on the Second World War had to be remaindered. But then, contrary to all expectations, interest suddenly swelled again a few years later.

A generation which had shrugged off the ideals of collective heroism suddenly wanted to know about the experiences and suffering of the individual within the maelstrom. Coming from a 'health and safety at work' society, they are appalled and fascinated by a period when life was comparatively cheap and when individuals had so little control over their own fate. The tragedy of civilians in war – women and children caught between two pitiless forces – has drawn previously unimaginable numbers of women to the subject.

Military history, dealing with the conflicts of the 20ᵗʰ Century, has started to react to these preoccupations. But what of the history of present and future wars in the 21ˢᵗ Century? How will military historians research and analyse what the Pentagon now calls GWOT – the Global War on Terrorism?

It is going to be extremely difficult. For a start the conflict is truly global, so traditional specialisations in a single country or region will prove inadequate. The areas to be covered, apart from the target nations, include Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Yemen, North Africa and Iraq. Weapon systems are incomparably more complicated and sophisticated. But the chief obstacle lies in the intelligence material and the need to assess its analysis. There is SIGINT – signals intelligence from intercepts – and SATINT – satellite intelligence. This represents a mountainous task, whose scope is demonstrated by the fact that even the United States intelligence services could not sift the material which might have warned of the impending 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington. If they were swamped, how will a military historian cope? Will the relevant material be made available electronically? How much will have been deleted and how much preserved? I do not envy those who take on such a daunting work.

To conclude, I would like to look at the other challenge which teachers and military historians face today. I mentioned earlier the power of television and cinema to create their own myths and propaganda, perhaps even more insidious than those experienced by previous generations. One only has to think of the relationship between Hollywood and the

Pentagon, which in exchange for supplying the hardware and its operators for action and war movies, can insist that the movie script is on message. The Pentagon has a movie liaison division based in Hollywood, especially for this purpose.

Some have argued, when talking of current depictioons of the Second World War, that historians, novelists and film-makers are at last at the right distance in time to be able to recreate the reality of war without the distortion of national myths and propaganda. We have a far wider variety of sources on which to draw and we are readier to use them. But other more modern myths can intervene, acting as filters or distorting lenses.

The film, *Saving Private Ryan*, could be said to be both a beneficiary and a casualty of timing. Stephen Spielberg was at the right distance in time, to say nothing of the moment of technological advance in special effects, to be able to portray war in previously unimaginable reality. Yet Hollywood is the least reliable purveyor of historical imagery for both commercial and cultural reasons. The demands of the domestic box-office encourage an americano-centric view of the world and especially the war. Anyone would think that the United States, not the Red Army, destroyed the Wehrmacht. And culturally, Hollywood is incredibly self-obsessed, compulsively doffing its hat to previous movies in a modern form of ancestor worship.

Saving Private Ryan, a reputedly revolutionary film about war, ends in a quite shameless climax, combining just about every war movie cliché in the book, with a mixed handful of professionals improvising weapons to defend a vital bridge against an SS Panzer counter-attack. The redeemed coward and the cynic reduced to tears are straight out of central screen-writing. The US Air Force arrives in the nick of time just like the US Cavalry, (a dangerous fantasy in the strategic thinking of the United States in the post Cold War era). And to cap it all, the final frames are of Private Ryan, standing in old age amid the rows of white crosses in a military cemetery, saluting his fallen comrades as tears run down his cheeks.

So what, apart from milking our tear-ducts with both hands, was Spielberg really trying to do? Was his revolutionary approach to realism — the special effects and stunt teams make up the largest blocks in the credits — simply an attempt to conceal a deeply conservative message, as some commentators claimed? I do not think that it is quite as simple as that. He brilliantly portrays death on the battlefield as the final reflection of childbirth, showing an utterly vulnerable pale grey creature covered in blood, crying for its mother. Amid the horror of war, Spielberg is trying to rediscover American innocence, that Holy Grail which existed only in a Rousseauesque self-image. Spielberg, like most of today's Hollywood

moguls, is from a generation scarred in the moral quagmire of Vietnam. He understands the national need in the post-Cold War chaos to reach back to more certain times, seeking reassurance from a moment when the fight was unequivocally right. 'Tell me I've led a good life' says the weeping veteran in the cemetery to his wife in the final frames. 'Tell me I'm a good man.'

'You are', she replies, and the music begins to swell — religious, patriotic and military with a leitmotif of bugles and drumbeats. This representative of American motherhood appears to be reassuring the United States as a whole. She seems to be speaking out to a nation unable to come to terms with its own role in a disordered world, to a nation which, for all its power, can be breathtakingly naive abroad because it is so desperate to feel good about itself at home.

After looking at the rapidly changing world and the modern American confusion over war, it seems right to finish with some observation on the practical problems facing military history today. Robert Skidelsky was right about the dire effects of the empathy approach to history. But the young, if they are not offered an immediate interest in the experience of the individual, will feel alienated from a subject which may well appear increasingly distant and irrelevant to their experience, almost akin to the study of dead languages. It is vital to preserve the diversity of military history through inter-relating a wide variety of sources and approaches. This is the only way to maintain a true understanding of armies and war in a post-military society. Military history — if it is to survive as a living subject — must retain a breadth of vision. Only in this way can it correct the tunnel focus of the mechanistic sociologist and the distorting lense of the mythologising movie-maker.