



## WHY TEACH MILITARY HISTORY?

By Jeremy Black

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The usual criticism against the teaching of military history is that it in some way encourages bellicosity, that it is somehow morally questionable and actually undesirable in the academy at any level. However, war, though undesirable in many of its attributes, and while it involves people killing and being willing or prepared to be killed, can in fact serve purposes which we regard as necessary—for example, liberty, civic patriotism, and international order. Indeed, nobody, including the UN, doubts that just war properly conceived is an appropriate recourse in international law and the maintenance of international order. War cannot be wished away. It has played a major role in the formation of individual states and societies and in maintaining international order.

### HISTORICAL UNDETERMINISM

Too often history is taught as if it were a clear linear process in which we know what is going to happen, we know the way the world was going to be, and in some respects there is an inevitability about it. But people at the time had no sense of inevitability about it. The Allies who went out in 1917-18 were unsure what the consequences would be for them of the collapse of Russia, the communist revolution, Russia's leaving the war, and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk between Russia and the Central Powers that permitted the Germans to move all their divisions from the eastern front back to the western front. When two powers start a war, generally both

sides think they can win, and at least one of them is usually wrong. Understanding the conditionality of it is very important, that the activities of those who take part in war—civilians on the home front, the troops themselves, commanders trying to plan options and strategies—are all important, because the future is in no way predictable and determined. A very important moral aspect of education is that all of us in any scenario—military or civil society—are part of a process in which what happens is not determined. All of us have a role to play.

### HISTORICAL MEMORY

One frequently hears observations such as, for example, "counterinsurgency struggles are bound to fail." Well, some of them do fail. Equally, since 1945, many of them succeeded. There is no deterministic viewpoint that tells you that any given stage is bound to happen. It is good to introduce students to the uncertainty of the past, because it helps them begin to think about the uncertainty of both the present and the future, an uncertainty that demands their attention, which suggests that history, present politics, the future, are not things one sits back and watches like a spectator, but in which one's own actions or choices not to act can influence the process.

Of course, one can pull out analogies from the past that help people think but also ones that are not carefully thought through. But it is nonetheless important for any society to have some sense of focus on the past. If one has no sense of focus on the past for judgment, then from where are people to get their ideas? The argument could be made that one responds to every circumstance in the immediate present by judging one's interests and concerns at that moment, that there's nothing from the past one needs to conceive of because the past is in some way dead, history cannot be repeated. In terms of war, one might argue that, because all of the weaponry of earlier wars is as outdated as the mammoth or the catapult.

In practical terms, however, no matter how strongly societies believe that they can reject the past, the only way they can do so is by a quasi-genocidal destruction of every attribute of it. In modern times, the only society that has

sought to completely reject the past is the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, and it did not work. It was also astonishingly vicious. But the general postulate is more important, that people look to the past when they're trying to understand the present. They have a group of common memories that in part frame national identity, a sense of patriotism. So the way people use remarks about issues from the past in order to discuss policy today may be flawed--for example, the Munich analogy of appeasement of dictators in 1938 applied subsequently in other contexts--but it reflects the sense that there is a possibility, a need, to explain things with reference to a common memory.

In the case of war, this is even more acutely the need. In waging war, one is asking people to do what they understandably do not want to do, which is to endure great sacrifices and even death. It is therefore important to look to some sense of continuity in order to draw on historical memories that help to make people feel that however difficult this is, it is in some way a necessary purpose.

All of us can justifiably deplore the rather crude sort of blood-and-earth patriotism that was seen in, say, Europe in 1914, which was naive, foolish, and atavistic. But in order to exist in a community, you have to have some willingness to give up things for the greater whole. Ordinarily, the social civility and order required for membership in the community does not involve terrible constraints upon people. But of course, military confrontation and war are very different.

#### HOW TO TEACH MILITARY HISTORY

There is an extensive body of material one can use in teaching students of every age about military affairs, the conduct of war, the nature of military institutions, and what war means for individual participants, both soldiers and civilians. Museums such as the First Division's have enormous collections of the material culture of war, and for the last 150 years there are extensive photographic archives. We now also have extensive film archives going back for nearly a century of war and extensive interviews, both filmed and taped, more recently. Students can also meet and interview people who lived through World War II, to record living history. All these sources can interact to give the student a vivid sense of what war means.

It is more difficult to look at the other side of the hill, but still a worthwhile exercise for students in the upper high school grades. This means that if you are, for example, talking about the Civil War, look at both the Confederate and Union viewpoints of the war. If you're looking at international conflicts, try to understand the experience of war from the other side, without necessarily sympathizing with that viewpoint. This is particularly useful for students who might end up serving in the military, because one can only know how best to wage war by understanding how one's opponents are likely to perceive one's actions.

Military history encompasses a wide range of sub-subjects. There is the operational history that is understood to be military history on the History Channel, the doings and campaigns and battles of military formation, but there is much more than that. Let's look at a few.

First, there is the relationship between war and the development of states. After all, it is through war that states developed. The U.S. bears the origins it has because it arose as a result of a successful war of independence. Through war again, the U.S. expanded from the Atlantic to the Pacific: conflicts with Native Americans, war with the Mexicans, the occupation of Florida. The development of the American state, finally and most traumatically with the Civil War, would have been totally different without war.

A second major aspect of military history is war and the international order. It is through war that the relationships among states have been molded and influenced. States that do well economically tend to demand a role and place in the international order that accords with their views, and until very recently they have pursued this through violence. It is entirely possible that military preparedness will also play a role in how they pursue it in the future. Some have argued on the obsolescence of war, which may be true at the level of great powers, since no one wants to engage in a nuclear conflict. But it is equally possible that military confrontation short of war will be an important aspect of the military history of the future, and we need to understand what will and will not be achieved through such processes.

A third aspect is what is known as "war and society," what used to be called "new military history." War and society covers an enormous range of topics, such as the experience of women in war and war and environment. One can also look at the military itself as a society. If you think for example of the First Division in World War I, the world it came from, you're talking about large numbers of men taken away or volunteering to leave their home communities and forming a new social order in which one had to rapidly introduce ways of behavior that fulfilled the tasks of the military. All of those are important aspects of war and society, and in order to understand military effectiveness, you have to understand how armies work as societies--what hierarchy, deference, order, independence, and autonomy mean in a military context.

A fourth concerns war and culture. War has had an enormously important impact on culture. The triumphant display of power through conflict was long a major theme of cultural output, and more recently one sees criticism of the horrors of war. Both cultural themes can be seen in the arts. One can juxtapose to upper-level high school students images of the triumphalist account of the culture of war and the critical account. One can contrast Beethoven's *Wellington's Victory*, an astonishing piece written to commemorate Wellington's victory at the Battle of Victoria over the French, with perhaps Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* (1962) or Penderecki's *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima* (1960); or Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) with an account from the *Times* of the bombing, then a German propaganda piece claiming that *Guernica* was never bombed. Doing so makes for an interesting lesson in how war is open to different accounts, and how those different accounts are sometimes heavily propagandist.

As one moves into looking at the experience since World War II, there are some wars of course of which the records are relatively dim. For the war in which the largest number of people--over 5 million--were killed in the last fifteen

years, the Congo war, we have very few reliable sources and very little by way of good film material suitable to show students. But for other wars there is a great amount of material from which teachers can draw to help students understand (a) the experience of war, (b) the purpose of war, and (c) the fact that war means different things around the world. It's tremendously valuable for Western students to understand that most war in the world is not a matter of Western powers; much of the war in the world is in South Asia or subsaharan Africa, and it is often an aspect of conflict that responds to and reflects the natures of those societies. Students need to understand what terms like tribalism and ethnic conflict mean if they are to understand the world in which they live. Through looking at recent war, one is helping to unlock students to understand that the world in which they live involves complex issues, that these issues are divisive, that the divisions involve enormous

sacrifices on the part of many of the people involved, and that these pose real questions for the U.S., as for other powers, as to how to respond and whether or not a response will be successful.

#### CONCLUSION

Teaching military history is a key element of civic education, which is an important dimension of society. It is a key element of patriotism, encouraging people to understand their own country in the context of a world in which they have their own values, in which their own country is important and central, but their country is not in isolation, it interacts with others. Any healthy society must encourage a mature debate about values and rights and responsibility, especially that responsibility covered by military history--namely, those occasions when citizens must risk their lives for their beliefs.

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