THE CAUSES OF WARS

and other essays

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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 which I will deal with 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 handmaiden of militarism, that 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 phrase '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 feeling, 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 nineteenth-century Germany such as Sybel and Treitschke, the maritime and nationalist historians of Victorian England, 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 over the muckier 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 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, 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
have any practical value? Here again the academic historian must have his doubts, and those 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 Khruščev, 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 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 Delbrück, 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 Delbrück 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 medieval or sixteenth-century warfare thought-processes...
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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 orthodoxy 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 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 War-
loo?) And the historian's mind is not a blank sheet of paper,
however much he may try to clear it 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 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 opera-
tions. 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 and arrows
moving in a rational and orderly way, with the principles of
war being meticulously illustrated, are an almost blasphem-
ous 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 in '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 for too long. But I do not consider them grounds for
regarding military history as useless. Given all these academ-
ic caveats, war is none the less a distinct and repetitive
form of human behaviour. Unlike politics, or administra-
tion, or economic activity, which are continuing and con-
stantly 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 analyse 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 so over-optimistic to assume that we
can make judgments 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 his 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 profes-
sional 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
practise 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 practising 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 prelimi-
nary thinking about what war would really be like, or they
may have had their minds so far shaped by a lifetime of 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 profes-
sional 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 because of the 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 eighteenth 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 eighteenth-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 totally 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 for ever.