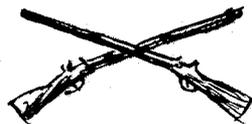


# The Nature of History



Maurice Matloff

**B**EFORE a reader embarks on the study of military history, he may well ask about the nature of the historical discipline of which it is a part. What is history? Why and how study it? In the swiftly changing world of the 1970s with newspapers, radio, and television pouring out a constant stream of information and news that competes for his attention, why should the reader concern himself about the past? Is the past dead? Is it useful or relevant to the present? Does it have anything to teach? Is history more than a collection of dates and events entombed in a dull textbook that taxed the reader's memory in his school days? By what standards can he judge the merits of historical writings and the contributions of historians? To answer these questions, it is necessary to understand what history is about, what its relations are with other disciplines, how it is written, what purposes and uses it serves, and how the field in general has developed.

## *History and the Historian*

It has been said that it is easier to write history than to define it. Part of the problem is that history has meant different things at different times from the ancient world to the present and that there have been as many varieties of history as there have been schools of sculpture, painting, or philosophy. Historians have differed in method, content, and purpose of their work. Some have been primarily interested in telling a story, others in determining and recording facts or re-creating events as they actually happened, others in interpreting their findings in some

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cosmic synthesis or thesis. The permutations and combinations in approaches from the beginning of recorded history have been manifold. The problem of definition is also complicated by the fact that in a sense everything has a past, and some would therefore define history as everything that ever happened. By this definition history can be extended to include the study of animate and inanimate objects that have constituted the universe from the beginning of time and have undergone changes—mountains, seas, suns and planets, plants and animals.

Such a broad extension of the definition tends to dilute the meaning of the term. The more common uses of the term history focus on a record of man's past, the study of man's past, and critical thinking about that past. Such usage stresses man and his activities, a concern with his past, particularly the recorded past, and the search for the truth about it. History thus involves a body of recorded materials from that past and a method, a special manner of treating those materials. The historian deals with changes, with time sequences, and with cause and effect relations in human events. He uses dates to peg events in time and help establish such sequences, changes, and relationships. The historian's concern with change has sometimes led to the criticism that he is overly concerned with the "pathology" of the human condition—war, revolution, and other cataclysmic events, rather than its "physiology"—periods or phases of little change, so-called normality. Stressing that the story of man is central to the multifaceted historical discipline, Allan Nevins, one of the foremost recent American historians, suggested a useful definition for the beginning reader in his introductory volume, *The Gateway to History*. "History," he stated, "is any integrated narrative, description or analysis of past events or facts written in a spirit of critical inquiry for the whole truth."<sup>1</sup>

While this definition emphasizes method and content in the modern approach to the field, it is well to caution, as Nevins did, that to enjoy and understand history in its many variations one should not be too dogmatic in defining it. There have been almost as many schools of history as great historians, and in many cases they have disagreed with each other vehemently over conceptions of the nature of the discipline. There are all kinds of history and no reason for the beginner to cut himself off from the rich fare that awaits him as a result of too narrow a definition of the field. A diverse galaxy in different lands and ages have written

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1. Allan Nevins, *The Gateway to History*, rev. ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962), p. 39.

from different vantage points and have left an indelible imprint on the field—Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon in the ancient world, Voltaire and Gibbon in eighteenth-century Europe, the German von Ranke, the British Macaulay and Carlyle, and the Americans Prescott, Motley, and Parkman in the nineteenth century, to name but a few. They illustrate the wide variety of tastes and fashions in approach—literary, scientific, popular, patriotic, biographical, philosophical, narrative, and descriptive—that have characterized this discipline over the centuries. They illustrate too that history is made by historians rather than by the actors in the events—“the movers and the shakers” in human experience. Historians select and cull the records and describe, narrate, or interpret the facts in patterns and priorities that seem significant to them rather than to the contemporaries of the events or the actors themselves. While the historian seeks the truth, in human affairs truth is relative, limited by the available materials and filtered through the spectacles with which the scholar views happenings of the past. What is important to one age will seem unimportant to another, and many of the seemingly significant happenings of our own age will undoubtedly be forgotten or viewed in different perspective by scholars a hundred years hence. Since historians and their histories are inseparable, the beginning reader will do well to find out as much as he can about both.

Just as the historian and his product are intertwined, so history has close relations with other disciplines. In method and content it is both a borrower from and a contributor to other fields of knowledge. The best accounts of the development of the specialized branches of learning, geology, medicine, religion, the fine arts, for example, draw on the historian's methods of ascertaining facts and the time framework of events established by the historian. In turn the historian uses the tools and insights offered by skilled practitioners in other fields to broaden his explorations of society, past and present.

History has a foot in the camp of the social sciences as well as the humanities. Indeed scholars are by no means agreed on whether the discipline belongs more to the one or the other. As a branch of the social sciences, history borrows the special approaches to human behavior in such related fields as economics, political science, sociology, anthropology, psychology, law, and statistics. With the aid of psychology, the historian is beginning to probe the human psyche more deeply in biographical and even social history. With the help of anthropology, he is better able to understand cultural differences and

similarities among preliterate societies. Political science gives him a special approach to problems in the art of government and decision making; sociology to questions of group dynamics. Statistics permit him to treat and digest masses of data and reach generalizations more securely based on facts—for example, the rich harvest of information gleaned from census tables and analyses of votes in crucial elections. The increased use of statistics in historical work has led to the entry of a new tool, the computer, into the field, and the mastery of the machine and its programming has become an interdisciplinary effort in itself. On the other side of the coin, history as the study of the past is the only laboratory most social scientists have since they cannot, like physical scientists, often set up controlled experiments. They must gather their data from a study of what has happened in given situations in the past, and consequently they must use history.

History has long had a close relationship with the humanities—with such fields as literature and the fine arts, archaeology, philosophy, and linguistics. From the beginning master stylists have contributed to the development of history as a literary art. Virtually all the great historians have been masters of narration. High standards of literary craftsmanship typified by such writers as Carlyle and Gibbon in the old world were carried on by Parkman, Prescott, and Motley in the new and remain an ideal of the discipline to this day.

Whether a master stylist or not, the historian can draw on the discoveries of the archaeologists to enrich his knowledge of civilizations in the old and new worlds in prerecorded times. He benefits from the linguists' studies of word usages and changes that shed light on the differentiation of cultures in various times and places and from the writings on philosophy, literature, and the fine arts that illuminate trends in human thought and artistic achievement. Through such auxiliary means the historian diversifies and strengthens the weapons in his arsenal to probe the past of mankind.

History has especially strong bonds with biography. "A good biography," Allan Nevins, an outstanding practitioner of both arts, has written, "must vividly re-create a character; it must present a full, careful, and unbiased record of his acts and experiences; and it must indicate the place of the hero in history."<sup>2</sup> Indeed some writers have regarded biography as the embodiment and distillation of human experience, the most

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2. *Ibid.*, p. 364.

important form of history, and even identical with it. History to Carlyle was "the essence of innumerable biographies." Emerson argued there was "properly no history, only biography." Although not all historians would go so far as Carlyle and Emerson, history does deal with human beings, both as individuals and in the aggregate, acting and reacting to impersonal and personal forces. And a first-rate biography will offer not only an accurate account of an individual's life but also project that life against the background of his times and serve as an excellent introduction to that period. Much history may therefore be learned in congenial fashion by reading outstanding biographies of those who have lived in different ages and societies. As the field of biography has broadened to cover nonpolitical as well as political characters, secondary as well as leading figures in all walks of life, and as psychological insights increasingly have been brought to bear, the historian's portrayal of the past has been enriched, humanized, and made concrete. The biographical approach to history, really an old form of the discipline, is today more popular than ever, and the historian and the biographer, two old allies in the field of letters, continue to walk side by side. Indeed, they are often one and the same.

The ties of history extend not only to the social sciences and the humanities but also to natural and applied sciences. In the pursuit of truth modern historians share with scientists the spirit of critical inquiry and utilize scientific procedures and methods to gather reliable data. Furthermore, since man's life is intertwined with his environment, the historian must take into account the impact of geography, climate, and natural resources; the invention of labor-saving devices; the revolution in transportation, communication, agriculture, physics, chemistry, and medical science; and the application of atomic energy. To understand and portray recent American history, for example, the historian must be aware of the effects of the great changes in space and time factors wrought by the new technology in transportation, communications, and weaponry—fast ships, airplanes, communication satellites, and missiles.

Through the nineteenth century, safely ensconced behind the ocean barriers that separated them from Europe and Asia, Americans concentrated on developing the bountiful resources of their continent in relative immunity from troubles abroad. In the shrunken world of the twentieth century Americans are no longer the beneficiaries of the relative isolation, the "free security," they enjoyed during most of their national existence. Once regarded by Americans as the Far East, the Orient has in

effect become the Near West. As a result, the historian of contemporary America has to grapple with the apparent conflict between national traditions and present realities accompanying the revolution in the strategic position of the United States in the world since World War II, a revolution largely a consequence of scientific and technological developments. In his never-ending search for important keys to unlock and understand the past and to gain perspective on the present, the historian gathers his allies where he may and enlists whatever help he can find from the pursuit of truth in other fields of inquiry.

### *How History Is Written*

How does the historian go about the task of reconstructing the past? What techniques does he use to produce his written product? Treatises have been written on this subject, but the essential steps may be boiled down to three: gathering the data, criticizing or evaluating the data, and presenting the material in readable form. Each of these processes entails its own special technique and training, but in the hands of experienced practitioners they are interrelated activities. Finding, sifting, and presenting the evidence in combination involve the skills of a detective, a scientist, a judge, and an artist.

History, it has been said, could not have been born without two basic elements—a body of more or less reliable materials and a critical method to deal with them.<sup>3</sup> While the historian relies primarily on documents, his sources also include a variety of other materials: physical remains—roads, fortifications, buildings, pottery, weapons, chiselled stones, coins, tapestries, pictures, sculptures, and other museum pieces; orally transmitted folklore in legends, ballads, and sagas; handwritten papyri and parchment manuscripts; printed books and papers; motion picture films; sound recordings; television and radio broadcasts; and computer tapes. The accumulation of data on man's past is a fascinating story in its own right; it long was a slow process, and only in late modern times did the materials become voluminous and the sources more complex, a process associated with the growth of large repositories in national archives and libraries, and with collections of private papers. To find the data on a given subject, the historian uses a variety of bibliographical compilations and archival finding aids and draws on the skills of archivists, librarians, and museum specialists.

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3. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

In historical research, sources are divided into two general categories: primary and secondary. Primary sources offer firsthand testimony of a happening, the view of an eyewitness. Secondary sources are descriptions or narrations of the event derived from the primary sources. Thus a letter of George Washington contemporaneous with his Revolutionary War experience and describing an incident in it, for example his first-hand report of 27 December 1776 to the President of the Continental Congress on the previous day's battle of Trenton, is a primary source; a later scholar's reconstruction or account of the event, for instance in Christopher Ward's *The War of the Revolution* (1952), represents a secondary source. Sometimes the line between the two categories may be blurred and the same document may be a primary source from one standpoint and a secondary source from another. A volume like Sir Arthur Bryant's *The Turn of the Tide* (1957) contains a primary source, extracts from the wartime diaries of Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, Chief of the British Imperial General Staff in World War II, and also offers commentary by Bryant, the author—a secondary account.

While in many ways modern technology has made printed sources more readily and widely available to the historian, the telephone has proved to be the historian's enemy. Historians of recent events have often commented on how an important trail they could once trace in documents may now disappear in an unrecorded telephone call at high levels of officialdom. But to supplement the written record in contemporary history and to fill gaps in it, the historian may draw on oral history—interviewing his subjects, recording the interview on tape, and using the transcription as a source. This technique is a modern refinement of the process of drawing on the testimony of witnesses utilized by probably the greatest historian writing of his own times, Thucydides, in his study of the Peloponnesian Wars between the Athenians and the Spartans. In this way the contemporary historian generates his own primary sources.

Once he has accumulated his raw data from whatever source, the historian must subject it to the second process, critical examination and evaluation, before he can use it.<sup>4</sup> The term

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4. For good discussions of the evaluation of data, see Allen Johnson, *The Historian and Historical Evidence* (New York: Scribner's, 1926); Homer C. Hockett, *Introduction to Research in American History*, 2d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1948), pp. 56-111; Charles V. Langlois and Charles Siegnobos, *Introduction to the Study of History*, trans. G. G. Berry (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), pp. 71-208; and Arthur P. Scott and James L. Cate, "Syllabus and Problems for History 201. Introduction to Historical Method and Historiography" (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1945), pp. 33-92.

*historical science* is used most commonly to refer to the principles of criticism that have been adopted by the historical craft. The application of such critical standards is the heart of the sifting process through which the historian puts his data. Simply put, the principles are really common-sense rules that have evolved to test the validity and reliability of sources.

The historian's critical examination is composed of two basic procedures: external criticism and internal criticism. External criticism involves those tests that seek to establish the authenticity of a particular source. It detects forgeries and false versions and identifies anonymous documents. It attempts to establish where, when, how, and by whom a document was written, for this knowledge is essential to the writing of history. This type of criticism is obviously one which the student of modern history seldom needs to employ. Forgeries and anonymous papers have been comparatively rare since the end of the eighteenth century. External criticism is used most often by historians of earlier periods who have developed elaborate skills to establish the origin of their sources. They can detect counterfeits through tests to determine the age of paper or ink. But as the average American document is easily identified, measures of detection such as comparison with other documents and textual criticism are apt to be less essential.<sup>5</sup>

For the writer of history, internal criticism is an indispensable technique. Once a document has been identified, internal criticism is used to analyze the meaning of statements in the document and to determine their accuracy, truthworthiness, and sincerity. At the risk of oversimplification, external criticism may be said to determine the admissibility of historical evidence, internal criticism its credibility. The properly skeptical historian can put several questions to his sources in the process of internal criticism: Is the writer of a given document a good authority? Was he an eyewitness? If so, can his testimony be relied on? Is he a trained observer? This necessary qualification is demonstrated by the story of the Wall Street explosion in 1920. Of nine eyewitnesses, eight testified that there were several vehicles of various kinds in the block where the explosion occurred, and three of the eight were sure that a red motor truck carried the bomb. But the ninth eyewitness, an Army officer trained to keep his poise under fire, stated that the explosion took place on a small horse-drawn truck and that only one other

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5. Hockett, *Introduction to Research*, pp. 59-79 and Johnson, *Historian and Historical Evidence*, pp. 50-75 contain discussions of external criticism and cite salient examples.

vehicle, an automobile, was in sight. His testimony was subsequently proved to be correct.<sup>6</sup> If the eyewitnesses are good observers, theirs is the best, in fact the ultimate, testimony. Testimony of one reliable eyewitness is good, but the best evidence is the independent testimony of several eyewitnesses. But caution is needed here. Two eyewitnesses who tell exactly the same story have probably checked their stories and agreed on a common version. Honest, independent testimony from several eyewitnesses will normally contain several variations, variations which tend to indicate that the testimony is sincere and independent.

To pierce the "fog of war," for example, evidence must be carefully weighed. It is obvious that in the tension and confusion of battle the participants do not see, hear, or recollect with absolute clarity. Neither do they see from the same position or angle. Few men in battle have a clear conception of what is going on. Censorship may suppress facts, especially in news dispatches and communiques. Military reports submitted to higher headquarters are not always complete. Important facts may not be known at the time; errors and failures may be glossed over; rumors of dubious origin may spread rapidly and even find their way into the official reports.

Was the writer biased? Here, of course, the writer of any after action report or any other account of an organization's activities is automatically suspect. Even if there is no conscious bias or deliberate attempt to falsify, a certain amount of unconscious bias will manifest itself in any number of ways—playing down mistakes, exaggerating successes, or failing to give credit to others. Participants reporting on their own activities can normally be expected to exaggerate, consciously or unconsciously, their own roles, and in dealing with arguments or disputes to present their own points of view with more sympathy and understanding than those of opponents. Personal memoirs, even those based on diaries, are immediately doubted, for the temptations to justify oneself, to absolve oneself of blame, to claim credit, to get revenge for old scores, and to be wise after the event are all too strong.

To sum up, sound research is fundamental to good history, since history is useless unless it is based on fact. The major problem of historical research is that the historian can ascertain many facts only through the highly fallible testimony of other human beings, and that much, if not most, of this testimony is

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6. Johnson, *Historian and Historical Evidence*, p. 24.

contained in documents that cannot be taken at face value. He must therefore subject each statement in such documents to critical analysis. In the process he applies rules of evidence, similar to those of a court of law, that are essentially a combination of skepticism and common sense. In this manner he rates his evidence in order of trustworthiness. At each step he puts questions to his evidence—to help answer the “how,” “when,” “where,” and “why,” and to arrive at conclusions. While this process may sound tedious and mechanical, actually it calls for imagination and boldness as well as caution and suspicion.<sup>7</sup>

With virtually all the material collected and evaluated, the historian reaches the climax of his critical examination—the careful analysis of the sifted data to determine its meaning and significance and to determine what new knowledge his end product will contribute. The meaning of the history and its contribution constitute its theme. No matter how arduous the research that went into gathering material, the author discards what is not relevant to his subject, determines which aspects of his subject are to be emphasized, and assigns proportionate space in his narrative. With these steps, the processes of research have been practically completed.

The culmination of the historian's work is the production of an accurate and readable account. The historian's efforts will be judged by the final product and his use of the three basic techniques reflected in it. If the historian in his research shows the spirit of the scientist, presenting a synthesis in interesting written form reveals him in the role of creative artist. The presentation represents a special art of its own.

The historian is of necessity an interpreter. Even if he knew all the facts, he could not present the total. He cannot completely reconstruct the past, and if he could the result would be unintelligible. The chances are that he will never have all the facts; documents do not normally reveal all, and if he is using oral testimony, he is dealing with fallible human memories. He therefore selects from the available evidence the facts to be presented. In the process of selecting, he interprets. How does he select? Carl Becker, a well-known American historian, aptly observed that the mark of a good historian is the questions he puts to the evidence. Those questions grow out of the individual historian's experience, reading, training, intellect, and wisdom. He will try to anticipate the questions of his readers and may well also ask what would be useful to the reader as a guide to

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7. Kent R. Greenfield, “Historical Research: A Critical Approach” (lecture delivered at the Army War College, 4 October 1950).

thought or action about a particular happening. He designs his questions to elicit useful answers, and sometimes he will have to rephrase or narrow them in accord with the evidence available. Basically, in his selection and presentation the historian attempts to bring order out of chaos—to show relationships, emphasize important developments, and establish a pattern. Since the resultant picture can be too orderly and artificial—for example, a description of action on a battlefield—the reader must be aware and beware.

The reader must be aware, too, that it is not easy for the historian to free himself wholly from bias of one kind or another. Even Leopold von Ranke, the leading nineteenth-century German exponent of presenting history “as it really happened,” unconsciously wrote from the standpoint of a contemporary conservative Prussian. All the histories of George Bancroft, a strong advocate of American democracy and nationalism, are said to have voted for Andrew Jackson. Difficult as it is for the historian to be completely impartial, his goal must still be the pursuit of truth. As Homer C. Hockett phrased it, “Even though he cannot hope to tell the whole truth he must strive to tell nothing but the truth.”<sup>8</sup> He must not prejudge the evidence, and his conclusions should follow, not precede, his study of the evidence.

In presenting his written study, the historian puts it in such a form that the reader can readily see on what evidence he has based his statements of fact. Full and accurate documentation is the stamp of authenticity the scholar places on his work. The character of the sources will do much to establish the author’s skill—or lack of it—in the evaluation of evidence and will also reveal to what extent the author has made use of sources previously available and has exploited sources not previously used. The sources utilized are revealed through the mechanics of footnoting that accompany statements in the text and in the bibliography at the back that groups the sources according to type. The reader should easily be able to distinguish between what is presented as fact and the author’s own assumptions, opinions, and conclusions. As we have seen, no historian can entirely keep himself out of his history. Nor should he. But the pursuit of truth requires clear distinctions among fact, commentary, and conclusions.

In the final analysis, how wide an audience the study will have and how effective the study will be depend on the author’s skill

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8. Homer C. Hockett. *The Critical Method in Historical Research and Writing* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. 10.

in the use of language, the perfection of his style. The historian's style reinforces his interpretation in a presentation that develops according to a recognizable plan and presents its subjects—the answers to the questions the historian has raised—in a logical, coherent, and imaginative literary pattern. Master stylists of vigorous narrative and vivid descriptive power can make the reader feel he is present at great events. With Francis Parkman, he can accompany Braddock's army on its fateful march; with Samuel Eliot Morison, he can participate in a great naval engagement in the Pacific in World War II. In bringing his judgment, perspective, and literary skill to bear on his narrative, the historian adds a sense of style in the larger sense, a contribution to history as a creative art.

### *The Utility of History*

With this background in the nature and methodology of the historical discipline, the reader at this point may well ask what is the use of history? What purposes does it serve? What can history do for the man of thought or action? Of what benefit is it to the average reader? Perhaps the simplest reason for studying history is that man cannot help being interested in his past. He is surrounded by history and is himself a part of it. Just as an individual draws upon recollections of his own past, his personal history, so a nation or race uses history as its collective recollections. The best an individual can do is to learn to choose between good and bad studies of the past in newspapers and novels as well as in more carefully assembled historical works. If the reader is at all intellectually curious about the legacy of the past, if he seeks knowledge for its own sake, history as man's memory can fulfill his quest. History may also be read for entertainment, and the tradition of history as the art of the storyteller is old; it is strongly reflected in the writing of its founding father, Herodotus. Indeed the current popularity of the historical novel and biography attests to the continuing market for interesting stories entertainingly presented. Some readers prefer history for the same reason that others choose detective stories—they simply enjoy it.

But history also serves other and more utilitarian purposes. The study of history is a form of vicarious experience, of learning from the experience of others. "It provides us with the opportunity to profit by the stumbles and tumbles of our forerunners," wrote the British military theorist and historian, Sir Basil Liddell Hart.<sup>9</sup> To study the past in order to understand

the present and obtain guidance for the future also has a long and continuing tradition in historical writing. With Thucydides, called "the first truly critical historian." Clio, the Muse of History, began to change from storyteller to instructor. Whereas Herodotus wrote his *History of the Persian Wars* in "the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done," Thucydides stressed history as a form of didactic literature, and he wrote his *History of the Peloponnesian War* for those "who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future."<sup>10</sup> While Herodotus was particularly interested in causes, Thucydides was especially concerned with lessons.

Some cautions are necessary to bear in mind about history in its utilitarian role. From what has been said about its nature and methodology it is evident that history is not and cannot be an exact science. It is a science only in the sense of being a search for the truth. As an effort to establish natural laws, science is based on two assumptions: that the phenomena concerned are recurrent and identical in each occurrence, and that the exact antecedents of each recurrence can be established and the relationship of cause and effect between natural events can therefore be formulated. Since the chemist or physicist can, by controlled experiments, produce this recurrence under identical conditions, he can predict further recurrence. But cause and effect in human relationships cannot be exactly established. It is not possible to discover all the factors bearing on any event in human history; documents seldom yield complete or precise knowledge of them. Nor do the factors ever reappear in exactly the same combination. In other words, while historians may repeat each other, history never completely repeats itself. For this reason the writing of history is essentially an art. Written history cannot offer a perfect reconstruction of the past of mankind. No two situations are precisely alike, and there is danger as well as value in historical parallels. When one relies on a historical parallel without appreciating all the variations in past and present situations, he does so at his own peril. Suspicious as he is of historical analogies, the historian is apt to be wary of drawing precise or specific lessons from the past.

Nevertheless, studying results of the historian's art is of immense value. By pondering the experience and precedents of the past, by studying methods that have worked well and those

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9. *Why Don't We Learn from History?* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1946), p. 16.

10. Quoted in Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1956), pp. 212-13; and Peter Gay and Gerald J. Cavanaugh, eds., *Historians at Work* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972): 1:1, 55.

that have worked badly in known situations, wisdom can be acquired. Although study of the past cannot produce precise directions for the future or a capacity to prophesy, it can broaden human understanding and furnish a breadth of alternatives. Of course, even the broadest knowledge of history will not provide all the answers to the problems of today and tomorrow, but study of the past is man's best path to a better understanding of the present and to some surer guide to the future. It is perhaps clearest in telling him what not to do.

What about the charges that in this swiftly changing world the past is no longer relevant? that history no longer is important? and why identify with the past at all? Why not start afresh and look ahead to some brave new world freed of the baggage of the past? Perhaps the best answer is that to change human affairs one must first understand their present state and how they reached this point. We cannot constructively move forward unless we know where we have been. Without the past, in other words, there is no standard to judge one's contribution to the present and the future.

Devotees of history continue to stress its general value as part of the broad cultural background of a cultivated mind, the mark of an educated man, an asset in communication among professions. But the reader must also be aware that history has at times bent to serve special utilitarian purposes and interests and at times been perverted to propaganda. History may be taught or written to inspire patriotism, a love of country, and respect for its heroes. It may also be presented in such a way as to inspire hatred of other lands and peoples. It may be used or abused—as in Germany under Hitler and Italy under Mussolini—to win support for a political regime. It has been employed to glorify a particular race, religion, economic system, or creed. In Communist countries, where an official meaning is put on the past, it has been enlisted to promote the belief that their peoples are riding the steamroller of history. But these are examples of the history of special pleading.

The way people look at history immensely affects their whole idea system and often determines it. And sometimes judgments are made in ignorance. For instance, students may regard the great American entrepreneurs of the last half of the nineteenth century—Vanderbilt, Carnegie, and others—as vastly talented men who brought the benefits of the industrial revolution to the people or as “robber barons” who seized industrial empires for their own advantage. Either judgment can influence their view of present-day capitalism.

History in its many capacities and at its best remains useful and valuable in diverse ways. Every generation looks to the past for inspiration, wisdom, knowledge, antecedents and precedents, and a source of ideas in meeting its own problems. In its capacity as a tool of research, history has been used not only by historians to study the record of man's past but also by other disciplines as an aid in their research, by political scientists and psychologists for example. As a laboratory of experience, history represents a broad foundation which can be drawn upon not only by other social sciences but also for individual education and training in the practice of an art or profession, as in the case of the military for whom vicarious experience is important. The study of history develops a sense of perspective, of the continuities and discontinuities, and of time in human affairs. A. L. Rowse has put it well: "Not to have a sense of time is like having no ear or sense of beauty—it is to be bereft of a faculty."<sup>11</sup>

To those who cultivate it, history offers pleasures as well as a broadening of intellectual horizons, an appreciation of other peoples' cultures as well as one's own. Much can be learned from defeats and mistakes in national history—as much, if not more, as from successes. The phenomenon of cultural lag, of continuing established ways long after the reasons for doing so have vanished, has appeared again and again in history—often leading to defeat in war. We ignore our past and other peoples' past at our peril.

### *Changing Fashions in Historical Interpretation*

Underlying the historian's never-ending quest to understand and explain the past, to make it more relevant and useful, is the question of interpretation. The search over the centuries for the key to unlock the past, to discover the most penetrating syntheses and meanings in the human story, has given rise to a number of diverse and often conflicting theories of historical interpretation. To understand that story historians have viewed the past through different spectacles—through different approaches to the selection and emphasis among facts and the causes of change. While they agree on the general importance of history, they have disagreed and continue to disagree on which

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11. A. L. Rowse. *The Use of History* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), p. 127.

approach is the most useful and valuable. Since each historian cannot entirely escape the influences of the period in which he lives, even if he wished to do so, the changing fashions in theory usually reflect the needs and values of the age in which they were produced.

Volumes have been written on philosophies and theories of history. Some ages have stressed theological interpretations. Indeed, history as the gradual unfolding of a divine plan has had a strong influence not only in the ancient and medieval worlds but in colonial America as well, where the early historians saw divine providence at work in the happenings in the "New Canaan." The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, usually identified as the beginning of modern history, introduced new approaches. Freeing history from theology, the Enlightenment encouraged the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and nourished the critical spirit in the use of historical sources.

Building on such bases, modern historical theory emerged in the nineteenth century in a number of distinct forms. One may be termed the "great hero" theory—that the most fruitful approach to history is through studying the lives of the great men of the past. But the question whether men make history or history makes men has long been disputed, and before the century was over the "great hero" theory was seriously challenged. Some scholars believe that the "movers and shakers," for example statesmen and generals, are simply products of their times and that their activities are conditioned by the times. Others would argue that great men can influence their times within limits and that the human story is one of interaction between the leaders and their times. They would hold that leaders are sometimes compelled to act the way they do as a result of social and economic factors, but at times they can influence and thereby affect the course of history and that both approaches are valuable.

The search in the nineteenth century for the key principles of historical change led one influential German philosopher to stress the importance of ideas, another of economics. To Georg W. F. Hegel each era was dominated by a specific idea, and the human struggle in each epoch constituted a contest between the idea and its counteraction. The importance of the idea, emphasized by the Hegelian school, came to dominate American historiography in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and the interpretations of history resting on divine intervention and the great hero took second place. Under such influence the ideas of freedom, democracy, and the Union are advanced as the touchstones of American progress.

But to Karl Marx, the German exponent of a materialistic interpretation, who bent Hegel's system to his own purposes, the path to understanding any historical era was the study of its methods of producing and exchanging goods and of the struggle between ruling and oppressed classes. Marx, it has been pointed out, invented neither the economic nor the class interpretation of history but he infused the theory with system and a crusading spirit. The Marxian stress on the inevitability of the historical process—the class struggle, the triumph of the proletariat, and the eventual emergence of a Utopian state—in which Communist doctrine is rooted has led modern Communists to regard history as the center of all the sciences.

In contrast to the Marxian interpretation, the approach to history in the West has remained pluralistic and essentially open-ended. While few American historians adopted a doctrinaire Marxian approach, scholars were influenced to pay more attention to economic factors. Charles A. Beard, author of *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (1913), led a host of American historians who focused on economic interest as a central force in shaping political and social change, and many publications have appeared that interpret various phases of American history from an economic standpoint.

Less influential on American historiography to date have been the European theorists, such as Arnold J. Toynbee and Oswald Spengler in the twentieth century, who from time to time have attempted to explain the rise and fall of civilizations. More typical and influential have been the interpretations by American scholars based on specific principles or theses applicable to American circumstances. Two of the most notable have been Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis and Alfred Thayer Mahan's doctrine of sea power. In his provocative essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," presented in 1893, Turner put forth his concept that the westward movement gave American democracy its distinctive characteristics and that the disappearance of the area of free land by 1890 marked the close of an era in American history. While Turner stressed domestic factors to explain American development, Admiral Mahan in his *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (1890) and *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793-1812* (1892) put forth his thesis of the role of sea power in determining the destiny of modern nations. Drawing lessons from his studies of naval history, the apostle of sea power called upon the United States to "look outward" and fulfill its mission as a rising world power. As new interests and findings on the American scene

have appeared, the search for special theses or integrating principles on other fronts has continued in American historiography.

Two schools revolving around opposite views of objectivity in historical writing deserve special notice. One, the school of "scientific history" that took Ranke as its hero, argued that objectivity was an attainable ideal. The accumulation of facts systematically and objectively set forth in monographs, studies on particular subjects, would provide the ultimate reality. The historian should therefore concentrate on collecting and verifying the facts. When properly arranged, the facts would in effect interpret themselves. Using Ranke's guideline of telling the story as it really happened, history purported to be scientific and shared the heady state of science in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The establishment of the first seminars in American universities for training American historians in stricter canons of historical scholarship arose out of this German influence. But this school came under increasing fire in the early twentieth century in Europe and the United States. In the United States the attack was led by the proponents of the "New History," who argued that the historian neither could nor should be objective and that history should serve current interests of society and be in accord with the historian's own values. The leading exponent of this approach, James Harvey Robinson, incorporated his views in *The New History* (1912). A collaborator with Charles Beard in producing pioneering, broad-ranging texts in European history covering economic, cultural, and political affairs, he was influential in persuading teachers of history to give more attention to contemporary problems. Thus, the "New History" school opened the door for history and historians to serve current political ends.

Reinforcement of the attack on "scientific" history came from the doctrine of "historical relativism" which shared some elements in common with the "New History." Carl L. Becker, a contemporary and friend of leading historians of the "New School" but less convinced than they of the utility of history as a direct instrument of social change, set forth the case for "historical relativism" in his presidential address, "Everyman His Own Historian," before the American Historical Association in December 1931. Sensitive to the limits of historical knowledge, he argued that historical facts cannot speak for themselves; that the historian must select and interpret facts, and that the principles he employs in the process reflect the values and

interests of his own society. "If the essence of history is the memory of things said and done," he contended, "then it is obvious that every normal person, Mr. Everyman, knows some history." As Becker portrayed it, the remembered past is essentially living history. "Being neither omniscient nor omnipresent," he went on, "the historian is not the same person always and everywhere; and for him, as for Mr. Everyman, the form and significance of remembered events, like the extension and velocity of physical objects, will vary with the time and place of the observer."<sup>12</sup>

Like Becker, most American historians today would not subscribe to the idea that history should be deliberately enlisted as an instrument of social change. Certainly historians disagree on the direction social change should take and even the "New History" leaders did not act consistently in practice on the basis of this principle. Most historians today accept the idea that a balance must be struck between history as a carefully researched body of facts and history as an exercise in interpretation. They would agree that interpretation is necessary and inevitable but that objectivity, even if not completely attainable, must remain the goal. They tend to avoid dogmatic theories but to look for insights and hypotheses from whatever quarter to shed light on the facts they gather. Suspicious of neat and easy generalizations or explanations resting on a single cause, they subscribe to multiple causation, a pluralistic approach, to interpret the great changes in man's past.

On the basis of past changes in historical fashions, the rise and fall of successive theories of interpretation, we may be certain that history in the twenty-first century will be written differently from the way it is done today. The changing fashions have come not only in response to new research and findings and new weapons in the historian's arsenal but also to new needs. Each generation rewrites history in terms of its problems, interests, and tastes. It holds up a new mirror to the past it cannot completely recover or, to change the figure, refocuses its lens. The discipline has responded to every great current of ideas in the Western world since its emergence in modern dress in the eighteenth century—to science, evolution, democracy, nationalism, sociology, psychology, and so forth. The contents, as well as the techniques and interpretations, of history reflect the

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12. Carl L. Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian* (New York: F. S. Crofts and Co., 1935), pp. 235-36, 251-52.

changing influences from generation to generation. Modern history began with a focus largely on politics and war, with kings and their conquests. In recent years there has been more and more interest in economic, social, and cultural matters. New fields of interest have arisen and the older fields have been broadened and enriched. The varieties of history are greater than ever. Political history, religious history, military history, and biographical history exist side by side with social history, intellectual history (sometimes called the history of ideas or cultural history), and economic history and its more specialized forms, labor and business history. There is more interest than ever in contemporary history, the study of the recent past, in comparative history, ethnic history, and urban history. With their connections with other social sciences stronger than ever, the practitioners are adapting interdisciplinary approaches and sociological, psychological, and quantitative techniques to older as well as newer forms of history.

The legacy of ferment left from older debates in historical interpretation continues in the newer guises, particularly over trends in recent history. Thus a dispute rages between those who accept conventional or official interpretations for the outbreak of World War I, World War II, and the Cold War and those who adopt revisionist views, and between those who would emphasize "consensus" in modern history and those who would stress "conflict." Regardless of the outcome of current debates among scholars, we may be sure that the same phenomena looked at from different points of view, in the future as in the past, will produce different interpretations.

The awesome problems of the current dynamic age in the wake of two destructive world conflicts, the spread of nuclear weapons and revolutionary warfare, and doubt raised about the future of mankind have set historians once more to reexamine the past in search of wisdom, understanding, and guidance. That search would appear to underscore H. G. Wells' characterization of history as "more and more a race between education and catastrophe." Once more the inseparability of the past from the present is being demonstrated. Inevitably the turmoil of the twentieth century and the anxiety over national security and survival have led historians to take a fresh look at the military factor, as well as the relations between military affairs and society, in man's past. And the same broadening, deepening, and cross-fertilization in technique, content, and interpretation apparent in other fields of history in this century are increasingly reflected in the area that lies on the frontier between general

history and military art and science, the field of military history, to which we now turn.

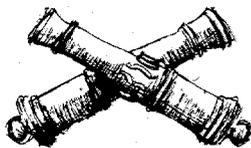
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## A Perspective on Military History

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Col. Thomas E. Griess

**N**OT infrequently critics charge that history is of marginal value because it has little relevance to the present. They argue that the living present, not the dead past, is important and demands attention. This claim is usually based upon a dangerously narrow and unbalanced view of the present and ignores the everyday use people make of the past. We cannot escape history because the present is an extension of historical events that in some instances are still running their course. Most current problems originated in the past, and the forces working upon contemporary society are better understood by knowing something of the historical roots of those forces. People cannot avoid making judgments or taking sides on controversial issues indefinitely; neither bland, uninformed compromise nor allegedly sophisticated skepticism are suitable substitutes for a knowledge of the past which will assist them in criticizing and reevaluating their assumptions and judgments. Convictions, values, and standards accumulate over time; one generation modifies those passed on by a previous generation, but it also builds upon the earlier standards and passes on to the next generation a changed but still historically growing body of conclusions. Not a few presidents have placed high value on reading and knowing history, and the shelves in bookstores and libraries continue to grow with new works on all types of history. The public demand, at least, does not seem to sustain the pessimistic claim about irrelevance.

Like the general discipline, military history also has its critics and its advocates, as well as a substantial appeal to both civilian and military audiences. The fraternity of scholars has traditionally shown some skepticism toward military history, despite rejoinders from distinguished advocates. That attitude has stemmed from at least two causes. First, hating the futility of

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war, historians have dwelt largely on cause and effect and have shown minimal concern for how war has historically become institutionalized. Second, they have rebelled against the utilitarian aspects of operational military history. Until very recently in America, these two considerations have influenced most writers of general history against incorporating, or at least recognizing, military history as an important element in the broader narratives. Charles Francis Adams recognized this feeling when he advocated higher esteem for military history at the 1899 meeting of the American Historical Association and urged general historians to encourage the writing of factual military history and to rely upon, even incorporate, it in their works.

Indeed, the aggressive, combative nature of man and the historical resort to force by nations has made the study of war inevitable. Sir Charles Oman argued that "one may dislike war just as one dislikes disease; but to decry the necessity for studying it . . . is no less absurd than it would be to minimize the need for medical investigation because one disliked cancer or tuberculosis." Similarly, Cyril Falls later took up the cudgel for studying military history as opposed to studying primarily the laborer, the peasant, or the ruler:<sup>1</sup>

What I want to urge is that all men, common and uncommon, great and small . . . have been profoundly and unceasingly influenced by war. Our literature, our art and our architecture are stamped with the vestiges of war. Our very language has a thousand bellicose words and phrases woven into its fabric. And our material destinies, our social life and habits, our industry and trade, have assumed their present forms and characteristics largely as the result of war. . . . We are, all of us, indeed, the heirs of many wars.

Thus it has been throughout most of history. Men, sometimes participants, have always written about war in one form or another. The thoughtful professional soldier is well advised to consider what military history encompasses, to appreciate how it properly must remain part of the overall discipline of history, and to understand how study of the subject can be personally meaningful. Frank Craven made the point clearly in 1959:

Let it be admitted that the modern technological revolution has confronted us with military problems of unprecedented complexity, problems made all the more difficult because of the social and political turbulence of the age in which we live. But precisely because of these

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1. Sir Charles Oman, *Studies in the Napoleonic Wars* (London: Methuen, 1930), p. 24. Cyril Falls, *The Place of War in History* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1947), p. 7.

revolutionary developments, let me suggest that you had better study military history, indeed all history, as no generation of military men have studied it before.<sup>2</sup>

### The Scope of Military History

Not until the early 1800s did military history become a special field apart from general history. Jomini, the nineteenth century Swiss theorist, recognized three kinds of military history. The first he categorized as the pure version—the recounting in minute and pedantic terms of all aspects of a given battle, including such details as hourly locations of small units. This recounting was done without much concern for useful analysis. The second form, he said, used a campaign or battle to examine the principles of waging war; it analyzed the relationship between events and principles, and, applied in broad context, could reveal something of the evolution of the art of war. Jomini's third category was political-military history—the examination of war in its broadest spectrum through association of military with political, social, and economic factors.

While Jomini was thinking and writing essentially about military strategy, the great Prussian military thinker, Karl von Clausewitz, was studying the entire problem of war. Seeking to develop a theory of war, Clausewitz considered and wrote (*On War*) about the basic aspects of conflict between nations. In so doing, he was producing military history which can properly be classified under Jomini's third category. At the same time, he devoted considerable coverage to an examination of principles and generalship through the device of rigorous analysis and criticism. (See Chapter 4.)

Although the study of military history in terms of Jomini's second category (analysis of principles) can benefit the soldier, this approach also has its shortcomings, particularly in more modern times. In the first place, considered from the larger view of war as organized international violence, such analysis is most meaningful if the contest on the battlefield is decisive and overriding in the conflict. For a time in history this was often the case. But once industrialization and war were linked, the battlefield leader found it difficult to bring about the overwhelmingly decisive engagement.<sup>3</sup> Second, this analytically

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2. W. Frank Craven, *Why Military History?* Harmon Memorial Lecture no. 1 (USAF, Colorado, 1959), p. 11.

3. Michael Howard, "The Demand for Military History," *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 Nov. 1969, p. 1294.

operational view of military history slights the important institutional developments that take place within an army and the important roles they play during times of peace or prolonged periods of international tension.

Probably for this second reason, about the turn of the twentieth century a few individuals in some European countries expressed interest in a broader view of military history. In a laborious dialectical examination of the term in a 1914 lecture at Cambridge, Sir John W. Fortescue finally concluded that military history "is the history of the external police of communities and nations."<sup>4</sup> Across the North Sea in Germany, Hans Delbrück was questioning the approach of the General Staff which prized and exploited military history as operational history, useful for its examinations of principles and strategy. Delbrück was interested in operations, but his interest was more in general ideas and tendencies than in minute detail or practical principles. He wanted his history of the art of war to analyze the subject within the broader framework of political history. In France during this period, Jean Jaurès, the prominent socialist political leader and theoretician, was articulating the theory that military endeavors could be successful only when military institution's accurately reflected the composition and aspirations of the entire nation.

After World War I, the Russian military theorist, M. V. Frunze, following Marx and Lenin in their acceptance of Clausewitz's dictum that war was an extension of politics, reflected on his nation's experiences and accepted Jaurès's theories as the foundation of a much broader definition of military history. Frunze noted that the actions of persons actually under arms could not be understood without considering the entire social context within which those actions took place. In a number of writings, Lenin denied the purely military character of the First World War, stating in one instance that "appearance is not reality. The more dominated by military factors a war may seem to be, the more political is its actual nature, and this applies equally in reverse."<sup>5</sup> While Stalin attempted to refute Clausewitz in the anti-German atmosphere in the Soviet Union at the end of World War II, he did so only to the extent of abandoning the outdated technical aspects of Clausewitz's theses. To this day, the theory of the interrelationship of military activity and national activity is woven into the fabric of the Soviet approach to military history.

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4. J. W. Fortescue, *Military History* (Cambridge, 1914), p. 9.

5. V. I. Lenin, quoted in Werner Hahlweg, "Clausewitz, Lenin, and Communist Military Attitudes Today," *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* 105 (1960):224.

Until World War II most U.S. Army officers thought of military history as being the systematic analysis of how the military forces of a country waged war. As late as the 1940s, for example, Matthew Steele's *American Campaigns*, written expressly for the purpose of analyzing campaigns and battles, was used in Army schools. And in 1937 a Fort Benning reference text termed military history "the professional analysis of events and operations" and envisioned it as being the "laboratory phase of military science." In short, the Infantry School considered military history of most value when it was used to provide historical documentation to support military doctrine. This application of military history bore a striking similarity to ideas advanced in England a decade earlier by J. F. C. Fuller in a seminal work that advocated developing a science of war in order to understand and apply better the art of war.<sup>6</sup>

By the turn of the century, nonetheless, some slight interest in turning military history to broader themes of national policy and strategy had developed in America. This current, somewhat akin to the work of Clausewitz, was characterized by Walter Millis as "the literature of popular education for publics and politicians in strategy, in military policy and in the theory of war."<sup>7</sup> It is best exemplified by Emory Upton's *The Military Policy of the United States Since 1775* (1904) and Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power on History, 1660-1773* (1890). Both authors used military history in an attempt to influence national military policy; at the same time, in other works, both men also wrote military history of the technical variety in an attempt to analyze principles or professional institutions.

Following World War II and the Korean War, a note of despondency concerning the relevance of military history began to be heard. This discouragement, largely voiced by civilian critics, was rooted in the belief that military history, though broadened somewhat, was still too technical and utilitarian in purpose and that if it was to be of more than antiquarian interest it had to become a broad study of war itself. J. F. C. Fuller, the outspoken, earlier advocate of considering war and peace as related phenomena in an inevitable cycle, claimed that since war had become policy itself it had to be studied to "regulate human affairs." Walter Millis went further and argued that nuclear

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6. *Military History: Methods of Research*. Infantry School Reference Text no. 25 (Fort Benning, Ga. [1937]), pp. 3-4. J. F. C. Fuller, *The Foundations of the Science of War* (London: Hutchison, 1926), pp. 19-24.

7. Walter Millis, *Military History* (Washington: Service Center for Teachers of History, 1961), p. 9. Millis identified three main streams of American military literature historically. The other two were "the literature of recall" and "the literature of technical education for the soldier."

weapons made most of the traditional materials of operational military history inapplicable. Concluding that a nation's use of war as an instrument, now, more than ever, encompassed every aspect of its social, political, and economic order, as well as the purely military factor, he questioned whether a modern commander might not find the study of past generalship actually deleterious. In his view, only if one studied war in its broadest terms—that is, made it less military and more civilian—would the exercise prove useful. Although agreeing that the relationship of war to society was important, Cyril Falls took issue with Millis and perspicaciously observed that “small wars without nuclear weapons have not been avoided and remain a possibility.”<sup>8</sup> Falls might have added that from another viewpoint nuclear weapons required formulation of a new doctrine which could only be illuminated, not retarded, by the experience of earlier thinkers who had also grappled with revolutionary weapons. Or, if awesome new weapons now exist, the human being has not changed much and the basic requirements for thoughtful leadership remain and are intensified.

Discussion over the nature of military history has been influenced to some degree by contemporary interpretations of the war in Vietnam. In a thoughtful critique of 1971 on the state of military history, Peter Paret noted that much work was being devoted to civilian rather than military aspects and that too few historians were “interested in war and in military institutions for their own sake.”<sup>9</sup> Despite the assumed irrelevance of the subject, the continuing discussion has stimulated an apparently greater interest among civilian scholars in teaching military history in the universities. Paradoxically, the rising civilian interest came at a time when the trend within the Army was toward minimizing military history in its own school system, a trend only partially reversed as a result of an ad hoc committee study in 1971. (See Chapters 17 and 23.) Revived interest has generally involved studying war and its institutions in a broad context, although more meaningful and sophisticated approaches to operational military history are being devised as well. As war has become more industrialized and all-consuming, military historians are broadening their approach to studying and writing about it. The Army's present concept of what comprises military history reflects these shifting tides of opinion.

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8. J. F. C. Fuller, *A Military History of the Western World* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1954) 1:xi; Fuller, *Decisive Battles of the U.S.A.* (New York: Harper, 1953), p. viii. Millis, *Military History*, pp. 15-18. Cyril Falls, *The Art of War* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961), pp. 5-6.

9. Peter Paret, “The History of War,” *Daedalus* 100, no. 1 (Spring 1971):361-86.

The Army has officially defined military history as an objective, accurate, descriptive, and interpretive record of all activities of the Armed Forces in peace and war. Expressed another way, military history is concerned with how nations prepare for war, how they wage and terminate wars, how preparing for and fighting wars influences society, and how nations assign and regulate the peacetime functions of armed forces. Because historians and readers alike often refer to types of military history, one might offer the following useful categories:

*Operational:* combat or military aspects; encompasses logistics, tactics, military strategy and leadership; includes campaign studies and operationally oriented biography.

*Administrative and Technical:* generally functional and professional activities of armed forces; includes studies of doctrine and organizational structure, procurement and training of manpower, and weapons developments; involves both peacetime and wartime developments.

*The Military and Society:* in an historical sense, considers the entire spectrum of military affairs throughout the cycle of war and peace; deals with national strategy and encompasses the relationship among the military, social, political, economic, and psychological elements at the national level; deals with institutional problems, solutions, and developments; explores the relationship between civil and military authority.

These categories are not mutually exclusive, and they are conceptual in nature rather than exact definitions. Because they are intentionally broad, a given work on military history usually will deal in some degree with each category, although it may emphasize one.

## The Value of Military History

Soldiers have traditionally attached utilitarian value to the study of military history while scholars have been more attracted by the educational value of the subject. It actually contributes in both ways to the development of the professional officer, and the discussion that follows deals with both of them. If sharpened judgment, improved perception, and a broadened perspective are valuable to anyone, they are crucially important to soldiers who may be vitally concerned with problems of national importance and who, throughout their lives, deal with the capabilities and limitations of men and women.

Studying military history can also help compensate for deficiencies in individual experience. Soldiers may serve only two or three years in a combat zone during their professional careers. Somehow, they must prepare themselves for waging war without the benefit of much practice. It is almost as if a doctor faced a crucial operation after nothing but medical school observation and practice on animals. Although what one learns from military history will not displace what one has already learned from experience, it will illuminate what is important in that experience. Careful and critical reading of military history permits analyses of operations conducted under varying conditions and broadens and deepens understanding. Moreover, as one continues reading over a period of years, he or she will develop a critical faculty in assimilating material and integrating it with experience. Ultimately, the soldier will sift out those ideas, conceptions, or principles that have gradually come to be most valuable in a personal sense. It is not an exaggeration to claim that individuals who know what was attempted in the past, the conditions under which it was attempted, and what results followed, are less likely to grope haltingly when faced with their own immediate problems. As Ardant du Picq concluded from his studies of battlefield conduct, "whoever has seen, turns to a method based on his own knowledge, his personal experience as a soldier. But experience is long and life is short. The experiences of each cannot therefore be completed except by those of others."<sup>10</sup>

Military history offers soldiers an opportunity to improve their professional qualifications. Indeed, in a world growing ever more complex and in a society which increasingly questions old methods and values, soldiers must study their profession continuously if they expect to meet the challenges which the unlimited liability clause in battle may pose at any time. No one field of study will guarantee success on the battlefield, but lacking actual experience in combat the thoughtful soldier will do well to turn to the study of past wars. And even combat experience unaccompanied by professional study and reflection may not stimulate professional growth. (Frederick the Great characterized some men as having little more imagination than the mule which campaigned with Prince Eugene in the eighteenth century.) Among 4,000 Army officers of all grades surveyed in 1971, two out of three indicated that the study of military history had been professionally beneficial. According to these officers,

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10. Ardant du Picq, *Battle Studies*, trans. John N. Greely and Robert C. Cotton (Harrisburg: Military Service Publishing Company, 1947), p. 8.

whose appreciation increased with military rank, the principal benefits are insight gained from studying problems which illuminate contemporary difficulties and perception gained from studying military success and failure.<sup>11</sup>

A caveat is necessary, however. History provides no clear cut lessons for the reader. Situations in history may resemble contemporary ones, but they are never exactly alike, and it is a foolish person who tries blindly to apply a purely historical solution to a contemporary problem. Wars resemble each other more than they resemble other human activities, but similarities between wars can be exaggerated. As Michael Howard warned,

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 dangers of repeating the errors of the past because he is ignorant that they have been made, and of remaining bound by theories deduced from past history although changes in conditions have rendered these theories obsolete.<sup>12</sup>

Carefully grounded in military history, the soldier can nevertheless develop useful theories, ideas, and interpretations about the practice of the military profession. This is the immensely stimulating and educational role of the critic, a role in which one explores and tests alternative solutions to a given problem. The person who attempts this exercise will need to know military history well since it will form the base of the criticism, whether the problem is strategic, tactical, logistical, or social. A knowledge of philosophy, political science, and sociology will also be useful to complement the historical base. And our critic will still need much patience, analytical skill, honesty, and objectivity. Such qualifications, exploited by individual brilliance and dedication, produced a Clausewitz. And this type of critical inquiry led Liddell Hart to discover and advocate his "indirect approach." Here we have an example of how military history studied in depth and involving careful research can provide the basis of a doctrinal idea. After considerable study, Liddell Hart wrote *Strategy*, which was a form of special pleading for the theory of the indirect approach,

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11. Ad Hoc Committee, Department of the Army, "Report on the Army Need for the Study of Military History" (West Point, N.Y., 1971), vol. IV.

12. Michael Howard, "The Use and Abuse of Military History," *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* 107 (1962):7.

using selected examples to support that theory which earlier research had assured him was universally valid.<sup>13</sup>

But conceptions based upon historical experience do not necessarily guarantee success in the field. A careful study of history will illustrate that principles are not immutable rules which the commander is forbidden to violate. Nor should a theory be based on historical examples arbitrarily selected to support an unfounded preconception. What is necessary is rigorous testing and honest, thorough research. If an historically based principle is fallible, however, it is infinitely better than pure theory ungrounded on historical experience. The French strategic paralysis in 1940, for example, resulted at least as much from faulty, highly theoretical thinking as from lack of resources.

The study of military history, particularly of the operational variety, can inspire many men and women. Because of the tendency to magnify the obstacles and hardships of warfare, soldiers may adjust more quickly to combat if they know that others have overcome similar or worse conditions. Accuracy of depiction is important, however, for inspiration can turn to disillusion if the history is distorted or propagandist. Overly didactic unit histories may paint war romantically and the deeds of the unit in terms more mythical than realistic. When the young soldier of the unit then first experiences war he may find the shock completely demoralizing. And if military history is exploited too often to stimulate a superficial patriotism, it can produce cynicism among thoughtful persons.

Historically, pride of profession has been a necessary and foremost characteristic of the soldier. A wide and critical reading of military history can help the soldier define and appreciate the meaning of professionalism. Personal understanding will be shaped by learning what others have used as yardsticks in the past. Broad study and careful reflection on earlier views will also encourage analysis of the military ethic which can stimulate useful discussion of that ethic with others who may be less well informed. What obligations does professionalism require? How do the demands of war determine the nature of military professionalism? How does one educate oneself for the grave responsibilities of leadership on the battlefield? History can help provide answers to these questions.

Professionalism also nurtures the ability to reach conclusions

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13. Support for this interpretation appears in Jay Luvaas, *The Education of an Army* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964).

by combining recognition of a sense of duty with a scientific commitment to the determination of cause and effect. Studied in depth, military history can contribute to learning this approach to a problem. The scientist works with matter, energy, and natural laws, but the soldier in addition works with the most unpredictable material of all—human beings. The leader's mental attitude, or professional frame of mind, must accordingly be both tough and compassionate. Studying military history can help one gauge human capabilities and limitations while offering guidelines on how to make the best use of both. It may also help some soldiers learn how to lead faltering human beings to accomplishments they believe beyond them. Speaking to British Staff College candidates, Sir Archibald Percival Wavell advised:

Study the human side of history . . . to learn that Napoleon in 1796 with 20,000 beat combined forces of 30,000 by something called economy of force or operating on interior lines is a mere waste of time. If you can understand how a young unknown man inspired a half starved ragged, rather Bolshie crowd; how he filled their bellies; how he outmarched, outwitted, outbluffed and defeated men who had studied war all their lives and waged it according to the text-books of their time, you will have learnt something worth knowing.<sup>14</sup>

Personal study for the American troop leader must also include an examination of American institutions, society, customs, and general history since they contribute to beliefs and ideals that motivate subordinates. Study of the American military experience can help a leader gain valuable insights: the changing outlook of citizens who enter the Army and their reactions to military service; views of the regular versus those of the conscript; what subordinates expect of their leaders; and human reactions to adversity. Leadership, an important aspect of professionalism, can be profitably studied by reading history with its many examples, good and bad. The leader who knows his own leadership style learns what to emulate and what to avoid. In learning vicariously about people one perceives that the basic elements of human nature do not change even though society and institutions are in a constant state of flux. This perception requires a critical reading of works which may be self-seeking autobiographies or propaganda offered under the guise of history.

There is a good deal of the visceral in military leadership, but the moral side of leadership is particularly important because it is so influenced by a person's character. By studying military

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14. Quoted by Major General E. K. G. Sixsmith, "Military History or War Studies?" *The Army Quarterly and Defense Journal* 101 (1971):439.

history one can learn something about strength of character. In all American military annals, there is no better example of contrasting character in battlefield leadership than that of Lee and Hooker at Chancellorsville where the absence of strong leadership doomed a brilliant plan to failure. But leadership involves more than personal resolution or physical courage: It includes a deep and abiding understanding of the traits, weaknesses, and aspirations of subordinates. And it involves personal integrity as well. Beginning with Washington, through Sherman, Lee, Pershing, and beyond, a long, honored list, the student can find a tradition of integrity well worth emulating.

Careful reading of military history can supply a valuable perspective for the critical examination of contemporary problems. Historical perspective leads to a sense of proportion and encourages the long view; it contributes to an awareness that life moves in a channel of continuous change, thus helping to counter excessive optimism or pessimism about current developments. Moreover, it will help one reassess the values used to weigh achievements, methods, and decisions. Shielded from the heat and passion of partisan argument, for example, one can learn something of the wisdom as well as the practical difficulties in our subordination of military forces to civilian direction. Or the thoughtful person may appreciate that the apparent American penchant for absolutes can lead to a tendency to view problems as always susceptible of solution, thereby creating additional problems. Gradually, the student learns that with greater knowledge it is easier to assimilate new material and to associate the new with the old. Judgment grows more discriminatory, and one begins to separate the transitory from the permanent as ideas and concepts are weighed. One becomes aware that discerning differences in the historical flow of events is often more meaningful than establishing similarities through strained analogy.

The sharpening of judgment is part of the total intellectual process to which a study of history contributes. Rather than testing hypotheses in search of predictive models, history deals with cause and effect of individual events. It broadens the soldier's vision and arouses curiosity about specific problems, none of which are exactly like those faced in the past. A careful reading of military history can help develop what Liddell Hart calls "the scientific approach":

Adaptation to changing conditions is the condition of survival. This depends on the simple yet fundamental question of *attitude*. To cope with the problems of the modern world we need, above all, to see them clearly and analyse them scientifically. This requires freedom from

prejudice combined with the power of discernment and with a sense of proportion. . . . Discernment may be primarily a gift, and a sense of proportion, too. But their development can be assisted by freedom from prejudice, which largely rests with the individual to achieve—and within his power to achieve it. Or at least to approach it. The way of approach is simple, if not easy—requiring, above all, constant self-criticism and care for precise statement.<sup>15</sup>

One can properly question that it is possible to learn strategy from a textbook in the same manner as one learns an academic skill. But history can help the soldier by revealing qualities that other men have found useful in developing independence of mind and by emphasizing that confusion, lack of information, and friction are normal in war. Although no concrete lessons can be learned from history and then blindly applied, there is an argument for the broad deduction of general principles. Based upon a careful analysis of warfare, for example, J. F. C. Fuller articulated the principles of war now generally accepted as doctrine throughout most of the world. Similarly, students learn some basic rules that usually pay dividends (e.g., be stronger at the decisive point, thorough training often compensates for inferior strength, be aggressive). They also learn that these rules are frequently violated, sometimes knowingly and for specific reasons.

Experience improperly gleaned can make one dogmatic and lead to an attempt to apply lessons too literally. But this vicarious experience is the raw material of imagination and can lead to the development of new ideas. Combined with intelligence and ingenuity, imagination can lead to wisdom, sometimes a wisdom more advanced in years than a soldier's age would indicate. In search of either principles or wisdom, however, one must study military history critically and objectively.

Alfred Vagts complained that military men too often looked backward, ignoring changed circumstances, in order to prepare for the future.<sup>16</sup> And indeed historical examples are rarely, if ever, exact enough to allow unquestioning application to specific contemporary problems. By analyzing trends in tactics, strategy, and weapons, however, soldiers can grasp the evolution of warfare and learn something of the basis for doctrine—or devise a rationale for questioning it.

There is, of course, a danger in blithely applying narrowly based historical experience to the general case in search of

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15. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Why Don't We Learn From History?* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1946), p. 10.

16. Alfred Vagts, *A History of Militarism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), p. 27.

doctrine. Although the historian tries to bring order out of chaos, his use of evidence is necessarily selective. Moreover, war is anything but simple. Weapons change, technology advances, the motivation of human beings to fight varies; the last war may be completely irrelevant to the next one. Yet there are numerous valid examples of the doctrinal application of military history: Studying the ancient art of warfare, Maurice of Nassau devised tactical changes which Gustavus Adolphus brilliantly put to the battlefield test; a War Office committee painstakingly studied the British official history of World War I to confirm or to establish a basis for changing the Field Service Regulations; and, more narrowly, an exhaustive study of the American intelligence failure at Pearl Harbor resulted in a statement of doctrinal principles for command application. Douglas MacArthur understood both the danger and the benefits of this doctrinal application:

The military student does not seek to learn from history the minutiae of method and technique. In every age these are decisively influenced by the characteristics of weapons currently available and by the means at hand for maneuvering, supplying, and controlling combat forces. But research does bring to light those fundamental principles, and their combinations and applications, which, in the past, have been productive of success. These principles know no limitation of time. Consequently, the Army extends its analytical interest to the dust-buried accounts of wars long past as well as to those still reeking with the scent of battle. It is the object of the search that dictates the field for its pursuit.<sup>17</sup>

As a final comment it is vitally important to reemphasize that the soldier's study of military history must involve more than purely operational accounts. He must also study the institutional aspects of the military and the relationship between civilian and the soldier in peace and war: the development of the American military system within the society which fosters and sometimes berates it, and how military choice in strategy and tactics must conform to American traditions and the constitutional system. And studied in such broad context, military history can tell much about what Sir John Fortescue characterized as the supreme test to which war subjects a nation. The case for the study of military history in its broader milieu was well made by Richard Preston three decades ago:

War, as is becoming realized in the modern world, is more than a mere clash of arms. The development of armies and of their organization, and the narratives of campaign strategy and of operational tactics, which

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17. General Douglas MacArthur, *Report of the Chief of Staff U.S. Army, 1935* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1935), p. 32.

were formerly the military historian's exclusive concern, can be understood only in relation to developments in the world at large, in relation to advances in technology, and in relation to changes in political and economic organization.

In short, as Michael Howard urged, the soldier should study military history in depth to get beneath the historian's necessarily imposed pattern of seeming orderliness and to try to understand what war is really like; in breadth to understand the flow of events and the existence of continuity or discontinuity therein; and in context to appreciate the political, social, and economic factors that exercise important influences on the military part of the equation.<sup>18</sup>

In sum then, the study of military history has both an educational and a utilitarian value. It allows soldiers to look upon war as a whole and relate its activities to the periods of peace from which it rises and to which it inevitably returns. And soldiers who know what was attempted, and what results followed, are better able to deal positively with immediate problems. As their thought process grows more sophisticated, soldiers will attempt, more and more, to analyze critically, conceptualize creatively, and test theories. Military history also helps in developing a professional frame of mind—a mental attitude. In the leadership arena, it shows the great importance of character and integrity. Finally, military history studied in depth helps the soldier to see war, in Clausewitz's time-worn phrase, as a chameleon, a phenomenon that affects and draws its spirit from the society which spawns it.

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