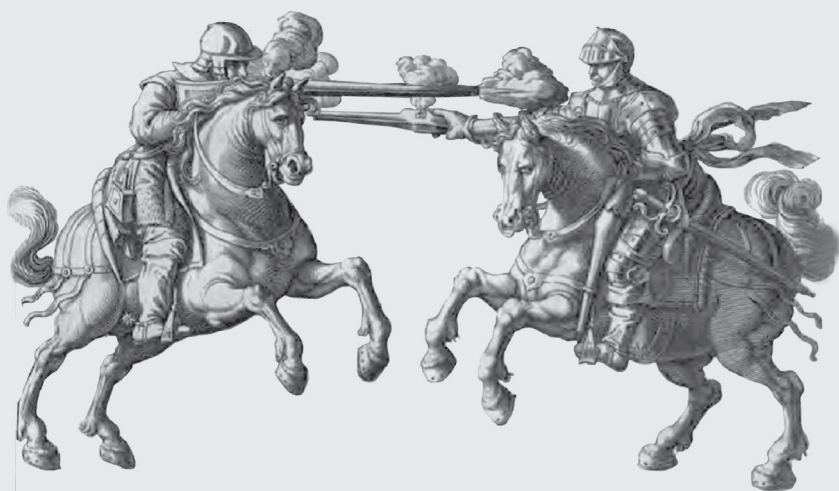


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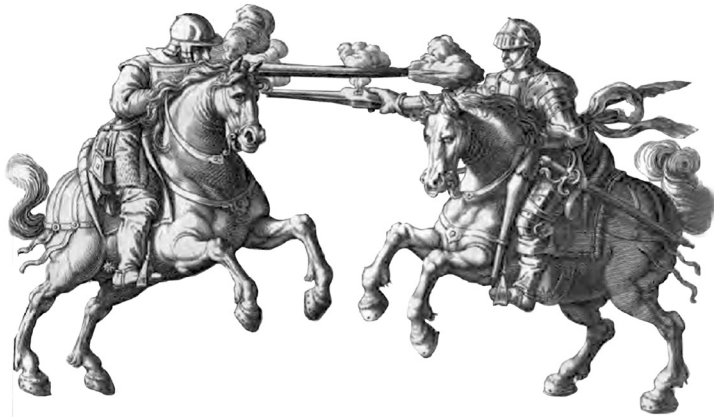
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*How To Study Military History*





# Military History and the Whig Interpretation

by JEREMY MARTIN BLACK

## *In Memoriam Dennis Showalter*

*(December 31th, 2019)*

*The death on the night of 30-31 December of Dennis Showalter marks the passing of a great scholar and good friend. The much-published Dennis, a great expert in German military history, and a past President of the Society for Military History, as well as a winner of the Paul Birdsall Prize and the Pritzker Literature Award, was an inspiration to all who knew him. Rough and ready in his demeanour and language (he frequently sent me ‘what the fuck’ emails about the idiocies of historians), he was a remarkable in his range and his ability to offer original insights. Paradox was one of tools and irony a means. Loathing the caste nature of the academic profession, he was proud of his position at Colorado College and, decrying political correctness, of his many links with the U.S. Military. A witty speaker, he was an expert at what makes a good lecturer – an ability to engage simultaneously at different levels in order to match the varied intelligence, knowledge and commitment of his audience. He also was a determined exponent of writing for the public. Bestriding the chasm between the introverted pointillism of so many academics, and the conceptual, methodological and contextual limitations of most of the trade writers, Dennis, who was always working, delivered book after book of insight.*

*For me he was a good friend. I first met many years ago on a trip to Colorado, when invited by the late Bob McJimsey, one of his friends and*



colleagues, and we got on well from the outset. We both enjoyed our meetings and particularly when we were able to do double-acts, most memorably for me thanks to invites to speak at Rick Schneid's Rothenberg Seminar. Dennis was one of my referees, and frequently reported on drafts of my books. His help was always sympathetic and invaluable. As two driven individuals, we understood each other and with much affection. I paid a tribute in an essay 'Military Cultures, Military Histories and the Current Emergency' in *Arms and the Man. Military History Essays in Honor of Dennis Showalter (2011) edited by Michael Neiberg, a sparkling volume that included William Astore's perceptive 'Loving the German War Machine: America's Infatuation with Blitzkrieg, Warfighters and Militarism' and Jeannie Kiesling's brilliant demolition of a lot of conceptive nonsense, not least that of David Bell, in her "Total War, Total Nonsense" or "The Military Historian's Fetish."* [The First Total War: Napoleon, Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007]. I add now the following as a small testimony of affection and respect for the greatest of military historians of my lifetime.

## Military History and the Whig Interpretation

‘M ilitary history is arguably the last stronghold of what historiographers call the “Whig interpretation”.’<sup>1</sup> Dennis’s characteristically bracing start in 2002 to one of his many sparkling essays has long excited my interest, and that I referred to in my *Rethinking Military History* (2004). Dennis indeed indicated by his remark a situation that remains the case, namely the poorly and under-theorised nature of the subject, notably the generally unproblematic account of change and subject. As a consequence, there is a need to address critically the ideas that currently prevail.

These aspects are linked in this under-theorised subject, one in which most

1 D. SHOWALTER, ‘Europe’s Way of War, 1815-64,’ in J. BLACK (ed.), *European Warfare 1815-2000* (Basingstoke, 2002), p. 27. [In his *Whig Interpretation of History*, 1931, Herbert Butterfield defines it as «the tendency in many historians to write on the side of Protestants and Whigs, to praise revolutions provided they have been successful, to emphasize certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present»].

of the engagement, by researchers, writers and readers, is with more detailed topics, indeed much more detailed ones. Such a situation is one that unsurprisingly will see the reiteration of theoretical conceptions and methods, however tired or problematic. I would argue that these include such staples as *War and Society*, *Face of Battle*, and *Military Revolutions*; each of which, of course, is very different in genesis, scope, and content.

Others, understandably, will spring to the defence of these concepts, or at least of their application in part, and may offer, instead, different ones for criticism such as the cultural interpretation of military history. Yet, whatever the particular instances in discussion, and we shall consider several of them, it seems apparent that in the field of military history, it is possible to use a theory that is definitely tired, if not worse, and to do so for many decades. The subject, moreover, is indeed Whiggish, because there is a Whiggish bent in some of the established accounts, and notably in terms of what Showalter in 2002 correctly saw as a bias toward progressivism.<sup>2</sup>

The Whiggish interpretation and/or mindset face significant conceptual and methodological problems. There is, most notably, the problem that the model imposes a template on events that leaves out what does not fit in. Instead, insisting on a granular approach means viewing them under the immediate circumstances of a particular time. In practice, the degree to which development, however conceptualised, is not linear, nor indeed uniform, subverts the standard usage of the Whiggish interpretation.

And yet, ironically, the very continuity of established accounts in theoretical discussion, or at least mention, suggest that, in this respect, there is an opposite to progressivism in terms of a somewhat stale repetition of long-established views. That point may be difficult to credit, but there is, indeed, a contrast between a sense of progressive adaptability in interpretation provided by these staples and their apparent prospectus, and what, in practice, is the repetition of such views.

Turning to the ‘why?’ question is always instructive, as the Whiggishness and the conceptual conservatism each arise for particular reasons. It is important to consider both the reasons for the Whiggish approach to military history, and its functions. As with the very military systems themselves, there

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2 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

is in their discussion a fitness-for-purpose dimension. In particular, a simple account, whether progressive or not, serves the purposes of two important constituencies. First, it enables military historians to move rapidly to the operational and tactical levels that tend most to interest them and their audiences. In particular, a relatively simplistic theoretical structure de-problematizes, if not simplifies, what might otherwise be difficult conceptual, methodological and historiographical issues, or even pretends or implies that they do not really exist. As such, the sub-discipline can proceed without any need to consider the constant procedural relationship between theory and practice. Moreover, this approach enables those working on a part of the subject to feel that they understand the rest of it and thereby can readily contextualize their own contribution.

Secondly, both the nature of the subject, and the manner in which it is approached, including the conceptual conservatism involved, is partly due to the origins of military history as vocational training for young (and older) officers. This is not merely vestigial, as much of military history is still written by current or former officers, while many of the 'consumers' of military history are students in military academies and other officer-training programmes. These military men are oriented, due to their rank, needs and, often, interests, toward the operational and tactical levels; and not to theoretical reflection and, whether or not related to that, nor to conceptual or methodological discussion.

Thirdly, such an account of warfare offers much to non-military historians. These are the bulk of the profession. Although many academic historians (and others) almost seem to wish that war did not exist, or that it could be subsumed within the category of violence, and treated thereby as a type of pathology, they tend to be aware that war has important contextual and causative results. As such, it is difficult to ignore. Yet, that point then poses the issue of how best to respond to the need to discuss war. This is usually done by providing a relatively simple approach. Moreover, such an approach is apparently best if it shares a non-military history in content and/or theory, as in the case of the thesis of Military Revolutions; or if the treatment of war essentially presents it, or aspects of it, as epiphenomena of supposedly deeper structural factors, thus pushing conceptualisation into the latter.

Fourthly, the nature of non-military readers should be considered. The overwhelming majority of the audience for military history are non-academ-



ics. Indeed, while military history has declined and shrivelled in academic departments, it is flourishing in bookstores, on airport book stacks, on Amazon, and on websites. The general public's interest in history, however, has always been highly presentist. This apparently is a method for the reader to understand our present situation and for the writer to inform us about the correct / wise / desirable path into the future. Great public interest, indeed, is something that is saving military history, in the face of academic disdain, and has many positives, but they come with some negatives as well, as part, as it were, of the package deal.

In practice, there are serious flaws; with the various approaches or theories on offer being subject to conceptual, methodological, and empirical qualifications, both in their own right, and with regard to them being able to act as more general accounts and/or explanations of military history. Indeed, some of the scholarship of recent years has challenged such powerful building blocks as technological determinism, the early-modern Military Revolution, and Face of Battle work.

Whatever the approach, the issue is how far to assume a focus on development and how far, instead, to offer an account that does not rest on such a thesis, not least with its questionable linked ideas of modernisation and modernity. In particular, modernisation and modernity were, and are still, presented whether, explicitly or subliminally, in terms of improvement. However, that approach was to be proved deeply problematic in terms of the successful resistance of opponents to what were held to be cutting-edge military powers. In short, how are North Vietnam in the 1970s or the Taliban in the 1990s-2010s to be built into the model, and its equations. Moreover, the changing character of the apparent nature of modernity - for example, in the 1990s-2000s, from the Revolution in Military Affairs to Wars Among the People, make this even more difficult, as modernisation is therefore unclear. So also on other scales and in different contexts. Thus, the total war capability of the mid-twentieth century was not that sought in the 2010s.

A related, but all-too-common, conceptual flaw, as in Rupert Smith's impressive *The Utility of Force. The Art of War in the Modern World*,<sup>3</sup> is to

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3 First edition, London, 2005; second London, 2019.

assume a central narrative. At times, this can lead to the assumption of clear paradigms of capability and strength, and the world operating as if it was an isotropic service, one that is equal in all parts. This approach was and is opposite to that of a fitness for purpose, with capability and effectiveness considered accordingly. The latter, however, was/is an appropriate response to a task-based and contextual account of military activity, one that took full account of the range of circumstances arising from culturally-specific environments, and the consequent variations in understandings and presentations of victory and defeat, success and failure, suffering and loss. Such an approach is inherently granulated or gritty, rather than smooth; and it undermines notions of clear progression,<sup>4</sup> or, rather, makes them redundant. So also to a degree with the scholarship involved.<sup>5</sup>

A granulated approach, moreover, complicates attempts to segregate particular categories or classes of military activity, as well as to have an hierarchy accordingly. Military history has to be contextual in examining episodes, and not just battles, with an emphasis on immediate circumstances. ‘Fit for purpose’ and ‘best practice’ have to be read in terms of the specific context, notably the challenge at hand, and not in the light of the wider arc of technological development. They are also rhetorical devices in the continued debate over military practice, and, with it, history.

So also with the organisation of forces. Issues of recruitment, of command, of victory, and of loss, affect the organisation of forces. Their recompense, loyalty, reliability, command and control systems, and ties to society, all vary, as do issues of motivation. It is possible to portray a developmental progression, not least from *ancien régime* (1648-1789), via revolutionary / national / conscript (1792-1866) and mass-reserve (1866-1970), to volunteer-technical (1970-). However, such a model suffers, first, from its concentration on land rather than naval forces, and, secondly from a Westerncentricism that treats Western powers as crucial and argues that other powers feature only if they replicate Western developments. This is certainly an unhelpful way to cover

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4 As in D. A. BELL, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It* (Boston, Mass., 2007).

5 E. C. KIESLING, “‘Total War, Total Nonsense’ or ‘The Military Historian’s Fetish,’” in M. S. NEIBERG (ed.), *Arms and the Man* (Leiden, 2011), pp. 223-27.

the period up to 1750 and even 1800, by which time European dominance was still limited in Africa and in East and South Asia, as well as not even being the case in the Balkans.

This approach also omits the extent to which non-European societies have followed different military trajectories in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially if due heed is paid to social and political contexts. Thus, models devised to explain the role of the military in modern Europe are unhelpful when it comes to considering China or Iraq, Indonesia or Pakistan. And yet the military in the latter frequently played a far greater role in projects of modernity and modernisation than their counterparts in Europe or the United States.

There are obvious modern indicators supporting such a granulated approach, notably in terms of the deficiencies of great-power expeditionary warfare after World War Two. In one approach, this trajectory represents the failure of one form of 'progressivism,' in the face of another form, in the shape of the doctrine and techniques of insurgency warfare. However, it is more pertinent simply to draw attention to the deficiencies of these very developmental ideas and to return, instead, to a consideration in terms of specifics.

Fitness for purpose also helps address a key aspect of present-day military history, that of its global coverage and, in particular, a global coverage that is not simplified in terms of a thesis such as the diffusion of a Western practice that is apparently or allegedly inherently best practice. Instead, there is a need to approach a global coverage by noting the autonomous variety of developments and initiatives and, in particular, the extent to which, as a consequence, Western-derived theories run adrift. This has been demonstrated as specialists in non-Western military history, such as Peter Lorge for China,<sup>6</sup> employ the concept and vocabulary of military revolution in order to undermine the idea that it describes a Western paradigm and process. Indeed, by stating or implying the possibility of an Eastern paradigm and process, the simple correlation made with reference to the original idea of a Military Revolution is rendered highly problematic. Separately, Westerncentricism in military history encourages the misleading presentation of imperialism, and indeed waging modern war, as essentially Western, and as imposed on other continents that were

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6 P. LORGE, *The Asian Military Revolution: From Gunpowder to the Bomb* (Cambridge, 2008).

inherently peaceful. This is totally mistaken.

A critique from a different direction comes from another instance of the use of evidence. There was in early-modern Christian Europe a large number of publications relating to war. These can be viewed as a key aspect of modernity, and one that indeed differentiated the West; although there were such publications in China and Japan. Other approaches, however, can be offered. As an aspect of the role of non-weapons technology, printing certainly transformed the writing about war in Christian Europe from the fifteenth century and, even more, the sixteenth. Books strengthened the consciousness of a specific military tradition, not least as printed manuals, whether on gunnery, tactics, drill, sieecraft or fortification, spread techniques far more rapidly than word of mouth or manuscript. Manuals permitted a degree of standardisation that, arguably over the long term, helped, at least for some powers, to increase military effectiveness and that was important for cohesion and the utilisation of military resources.

More generally, printing and literacy fostered discussion of military organisation and methods, and encouraged a sense of system, affecting and reflecting cultural assumptions. Information can therefore be seen as a key aspect of the shift towards consistency, regularity and uniformity in Western forces, as it encoded these characteristics and replicated them, which was a particular feature of the culture of print. Printing made it possible to disseminate reports, knowledge and opinion, rapidly and at great distance. Contemporary writings on war reflected the sense that not only were there lessons to be learned, but that they needed learning, a situation, inherent anyway to war, that has remained the case since.

Yet, there could be a backward-looking dimension, one that reflects the nature of knowledge and verification in the period and also, ironically, the extent to which, drawing on the revolution of the heavenly spheres, *ie* their orbit, the idea of a revolution in this period was that of a return to the starting place, a theme seen in Britain with the Glorious Revolution of 1688-9. Philological work and the Printing Revolution were linked to the widespread 'rediscovery,' and availability, in Christian Europe of Classical texts, and this return to the past served to validate new emphases. Rather than seeing this process as past, it is instructive to note the frequency in recent and current discussion of

earlier writers, notably Clausewitz, Mahan and Corbett.

In the early-modern West, Classical texts were reprinted, both in the original and in translation, as with Aegidius, Caesar and Vergilius among the re-printing of Classical texts. There was also current work on the Classical period, as with Jacob von Wallhausen's *La Milice Romane* (1616). Contemporary Western warfare could be understood in part in Classical terms: the Greeks, Macedonians and Romans did not have gunpowder weapons, but their forces did have a mixture of infantry and cavalry, and of cold steel and projectiles. The large-scale use of the pike in many respects represented a revival of the Macedonian phalanx, and could be presented thus. In his *Libro dell'Arte della Guerra* (*Art of War*, 1521), Niccolo Machiavelli tried, with some success, to update Flavius Vegetius' fourth- or fifth-century *Epitoma Rei Militaris* [*On Military Matters*] by focusing on the pike and treating the handgun as similar to missile weaponry. Both pressure for continuity and calls for change were framed in terms of revival and, linked to this, defended by frequent backward-looking reference to the Classics. This practice continued to be the case, as with the writings of Marshal Saxe in the eighteenth century. The German General Staff preference for a Cannae-type encirclement, one that affected operational planning in both world wars, can be regarded as another, but different, manifestation of this tendency.

An alternative method toward modernity relied on a new form of 'best practice', in the shape of the experimentation of the Scientific Revolution, notably with ballistics. For artillery, there was a process of mathematisation through an engagement with ballistics. Theoretical and empirical advances greatly increased the predictive power of ballistics, and helped turn gunnery from a craft into a science that could, and should, be taught. The extent of change in scientific thought in a relatively brief period, notably physics and mathematics, helps explain the value of the term 'the Scientific Revolution' and, by extension, underlines the limitations of the concept of the 'Military Revolution', which is employed to describe a far longer period.

The very presentation of so much material in print was an aspect of change, with entrepreneurial opportunities a particular aspect in (Christian) Europe, and less so in the Orient. The response to the potential of gunpowder was a major aspect of this development in (Christian) Europe. This response in-



cluded speculation over likely consequences and most appropriate reactions. Yet, again indicating the need for care in the consideration of evidence, the repeated character of much of the discussion poses a question mark against simplistic attempts to discern a 'Military Revolution.' Instead, publications testify to continuities as much as changes, and also to a sense of other practices that should be superseded, notably non-bureaucratic heroic command styles. The literature on weaponry and tactics also offered a range of suggestions, and some scarcely matched the revolutionary prospectus outlined by Michael Roberts and Geoffrey Parker, the protagonists of the thesis of a Western military revolution.

An emphasis on specificities, and on the deconstruction of established theories, raises the 'whither theory?' question, in the shape of, is there more to tell other than 'one war after another'? That is an appropriate point, and deserves consideration; but the understandable desire to shape the past and the need to be selective in what is covered, should not be a cover for poor theory.

Instead, types of military history other than that of battle, where, indeed, frequently success was a matter not of weapon usage but of experience, unit cohesion and leadership, can be considered in order to underline the need to engage with very different taskings. Fortifications provides a key instance, and it serves to offer a valuable contextualisation to the standard focus on battles, or rather on an atypical selection of battles, such as Breitenfeld (1631) and Plassey (1757), rather than the more complex range of battles in the Thirty Years' War (1618-48); or in eighteenth-century India, notably the invasions of northern India first by Nadir Shah of Persia and then by Afghan forces. The latter demonstrate the problem with the argument that Plassey, and indeed other British victories, necessarily define capability, effectiveness and success. With fortification, as with other aspects of military strength, there is the need to consider the multiple impact, including in terms of deterrence.

There is also the obligation to unpick clear ideas of proficiency. Thus, strength is in part a matter of opportunity costs, not least, in some cases, in terms of the very issues of expenditure of manpower, material, and money. The standard history of fortification is similar to that of much military activity, in that there is a focus on the state and the formal fortification carried out accordingly for the use of regular forces. This leaves to one side the more complex role of fortification, and, in particular, its significance for private or

semi-private purposes.<sup>7</sup>

There is a widespread tendency to treat private warfare as anachronistic and redundant, and thus a pathology of the system that should have been brought under control and that scarcely established standards for capability. That might be the case if the perspective adopted is that of significance and progress in terms of the development of regular forces. That, however, is less the case if the frame of reference is one of power around the world, with the centralised state and its regular forces frequently only one, albeit generally the most important player.<sup>8</sup>

If that is the case today, it was even more so in the past. That, however, is an aspect of military history that tends to be underplayed due to a focus not only on definitions from the present (and theories accordingly), but also, more misleadingly, as already indicated, a sense that the situation was moving toward the present. This has led to a variety of assumptions. It has for example led to an emphasis on recruitment and supply systems that rely on state provision, rather than assuming that private provision could have an appropriately important role. Indeed, this emphasis is an aspect of the assumption that the state should come first in the discussion of the military.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, returning to fortifications, the developmental model has to be used with caution. In particular, ‘cutting edge’ fortifications are not always those that were pursued. They were generally the most costly, not least as entailing the redundancy of existing systems, and, for that and other reasons, not necessarily the most appropriate. Indeed, lower-specification fortifications proved particularly cost-effective, not only for many states, but also for ‘non-state actors.’ Cost could be a matter of money, but also of garrison size and strength. Each represented opportunity costs, a point more generally the case with military procurement, doctrine, and strategy.

The value of lower-specification fortifications has remained the case to the

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7 J. BLACK, *Fortifications and Siegecraft: Defense and Attack Through the Ages* (Lanham, MA, 2018)

8 A recent, conceptually-sophisticated, approach is offered in G. CHET, *The Ocean is a Wilderness: Atlantic Piracy and the Limits of Governmental Legitimacy in the Modern State, 1688-1856* (New York, 2012).

9 For a valuable corrective, D. PARROTT, *The Business of War: Military enterprise and military revolution in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2012).

present, not least in the protection of public buildings, whether, for example, with strengthened glass, or with guard-posts of some type at the entrance. In areas with a high rate of instability and lawlessness, many households have some form of protection. This characteristic can be seen with internal protective rooms, or ‘cages’, in the event of housebreakers coming in, as in Johannesburg, Lagos and Nairobi. Outer defences are seen with many households in the case of iron gates and fences to protect access via the front garden. Some companies have established compounds where their workers live. This is also the model used by states that maintain embassies in violence-prone areas.

This situation clearly parallels that in the medieval period, with the need, then and now, to fortify both public and private buildings. In one light, fortification was, and remains, a key aspect of what can be seen as insurance, with the latter both public and private, and offered by public and private bodies, although in a relationship that differs both geographically and across time. By the mid-1990s, about 2.5 million American families lived in gated communities and the number has risen since. Thus, tasks and physical manifestations change, but without any clear sense of there being a paradigm in fortification, and therefore without there being a clear best practice, or development.

So also with other aspects of capability, for example warships or aircraft. What might appear the best specifications for weaponry are often not only the most costly but also, in part due to the resulting risks incurred through such losses, the most inflexible. The consequences can be to favour less costly aircraft and warships, such as the new frigates proposed by Britain in 2019, or aircraft developed by non-traditional arms manufacturers, for example Brazil.

There is also, as already indicated, the question of varying tasks. In these cases, and to focus solely on state provision and not, for example, that by drug networks, there are clear differences between what is required for state-to-state provision and what is needed for security against other challenges. The latter include lawlessness, such as piracy, for example from Somalia, and in the Malacca Straits, smuggling, and other forms of illegal activity. Uncontrollable drug operations in Mexico and Honduras are responsible for turf wars, rampant violence, hostage-taking, and the elimination of witnesses. This was particularly apparent in Mexico in late 2019, with the annual death

rate by then about 35,000. However, the inherent inability of the drug cartels to co-operate lessened their threat to the state, as opposed to its operations. As a related point, the frontier wall President Donald Trump proposes is intended for confronting illegal immigration and crime, and for domestic political purposes, rather than serving as a military tool against other states. As such, it is difficult to assess how it fits into a Whiggish model.

Yet, there can be an overlap in the case of the funding by lawless behaviour of separatist forces as in parts of Myanmar (Burma). Thus, the Kachin Independence Army and the Arakan Army were allegedly funded by protection money, drug production and dealing, and using control over minerals and over goods such as jade.

More generally, determining what is progressive, if such a concept is to be adopted, requires a sense of the challenges of the present, and also of past and future, and of how these can be related. This sense can be seen in terms of debate over procurement; although procurement means different things to particular groups, and also during specific times. Scarcely a new issue, such debates adopt the language of improvement and improvability; but that is at once both analysis and rhetoric, a situation more generally true with military history. Thus, hypersonic missiles, of the type now under development by China, Russia and the United States, may prove 'magic bullet' improvements able soon to transform the parameters of force to an hitherto quasi-fictional extent; but they may also prove weapons that are of limited flexibility in terms of options for their use, as well as being expensive to produce, deploy, supply, and replace. So also with the continuing instance of atomic weaponry. Moreover, all weapons are greatly affected by the development of anti-weapons and anti-tactics, and that again counters ready notions of improvement. This process has continued into recent years, as with roadside explosives and drones.

Time, therefore, is a variable that has to be employed with care, and notably so if granulated analysis is to be preferred to the rhetoric of improvement, whether or not supposedly revolutionary. This situation is likely to continue into the future, and not least because it is far from clear what context the major challenges will emerge from, and, more especially, whether they will be internal or external. If the basic driver in the world is that of population growth,

and the resulting pressure for resources, then both are in play, but the most likely one is internal, as with both the Arab Spring and Indonesia in the 2010s, and, maybe, India in the 2020s. This point, moreover, seems plausible in light of the difficulties of matching economic growth and domestic assumptions. There will also be resource struggles between states, for example over water in North-East Africa and South-West Asia.

Given this case, it is unclear how a Whiggish account of warfare can be regarded as appropriate. Instead, if ‘Whiggishness’ is at play, it will be, as with Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), in terms of the supposed model of the nature of society, and thus possibly be a variant on ‘War and Society’ approaches; although very differently to how they are conventionally approached. Conversely, if the weakness of multilateralism in the late 2010s is seen as prefiguring a rise in international tension, then it is possible that the emphasis instead should be on what enhances or lessens capability gaps in state-to-state conflict.

This tension within the range of military environments and tasks is not simply co-terminous with that of external and internal factors, but that is certainly a helpful approach to the issue. The problem with the theorisation of military history is that it generally relates to the external context of state-to-state conflict, and not to the internal of civil conflict; and this tendency makes scant sense for the many states and societies for which the latter is more significant. This observation includes much, although far from all, of the military history of Latin America, Africa and Oceania over the last half-century. Thus, since 1936, South American militaries have rarely engaged in state-to-state conflict. Moreover, even with major states, there can be a greater emphasis on the internal dimension, as with India and China in the same period. Integrating the internal with the external poses issues for historians. In particular, it does so for those attempting to offer a developmental account and/or a theoretical approach; the account and the approach being linked, but not co-terminous.

In addition, this point about the need to integrate civil conflict is enhanced if the notion of military extends to the armed paramilitaries that play a major role in the internal dimension of military activity. That point may appear to be addressed by them not being regular forces. However, in many states, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United States and India, bodies with names



such as the National Guard, the Republican Guard, and the Frontier Force, can also play a role, indeed a major role, in conflict with foreign forces. These are in effect alternative regular forces and, more particularly, regular forces controlled by central government that counteract the regular army and that, as especially loyal, can be used for domestic control and have often been developed for that purpose.

There are also irregular forces, both state and non-state sanctioned, as was readily apparent in the conflicts in Syria in the 2010s, including with Turkish intervention in 2019. Hybrid warfare, in practice a long-established practice that attracted a particular term in the mid-2010s, notably after the Russian seizure of Crimea in 2014, has led to a greater interest of late in the use of irregular forces.

Thus, the would-be precision that underlies much of the theoretical approach faces problems. So also with the attempt to distinguish between strategy and policy. Here, again, there is a degree of Whiggish positivism that is linked to the idea that the development in the late nineteenth century of a specialist body for the formulation and execution of strategy, in the shape of a general staff, represented progress. In particular this progress was seen as coming from distinguishing strategy from policy. The latter was held, and notably so by commentators close to the military, a group that includes most of those writing on military affairs, to sit in a political context that, allegedly, because of its very political character, was flawed or, at the least, unable to cope with the exigencies of military matters.<sup>10</sup> Strategy, in contrast, was defined as a proper sphere for the military.

In practice, this approach to strategy is problematic in conceptual terms, because the distinction between policy and strategy is not clear-cut; and that is the case in terms of both formulation and execution. The same individuals frequently do both, in so far as they can be differentiated. Any paradigm of best practice, furthermore, was complicated by the extent to which former military officers turned politicians. Moreover, and here the issues of Whiggishness and its use take on an additional perspective, there is (as with weaponry and procurement) the question of particular interests at stake and of their ability

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10 L. SONDHaus, *Strategic Culture and Ways of War* (London, 2006).

to employ arguments to serve their views. In this case, the strategy/policy distinction is in practice very much employed by the military, and notably so in Britain and the United States, in order to provide space for a degree of autonomy from governmental direction that is lacking in reality in many states, notably China. Circumstances, moreover, vary at every size of state.

There is an additional dimension, in the shape of the argument now that strategy is in some way a lost art, an argument applied to Western interventionism in the 2000s.<sup>11</sup> This failure has been blamed on the collapse of the strategy/policy distinction, and thus on the politicians, but the wisdom of this explanation is problematic as it downplays the inherent difficulties of both Western policy and strategy, however defined, in Iraq and Afghanistan. Both goals and implementation were seriously flawed from the outset, and, moreover, were so as aspects of a confused and largely unsuccessful response to a range of issues, from Chinese and Russian assertion and expansionism, to the successful, or at least difficult, 'anti-strategies' of Afghan and Iraqi opponents. The difficulties of comprehending non-state actors complicated the situation and led to pressure for a new theoretical structure, one in which the concept of hybrid warfare played a major role.

The confusion over the term strategy is more generally instructive for the difficulties facing Whiggish accounts. In large part, the evaluation of military history, and notably so for modern military history, is political, not least due to the quest to proclaim messages or lessons. That indeed is more important than the effort to learn them, whatever learn means in this context. 'Messages' and 'lessons' are linked to politics, both outside the military and within it, for the military is an intensely political environment, and with this politicisation generally highly competitive, and so both within and between particular services and specialisations. It would be foolish to neglect the extent to which this situation affects, usually greatly so, most writings about military activity, and notably concerning developments in a long-term context.

Not surprisingly, this point can better be appreciated if the national context of military publication is assessed; a context that is encouraged by linguistic factors as well as the nature of publishing. There might, instead, appear to be

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11 H. STRACHAN, 'The Lost Meaning of Strategy,' *Survival*, 47 (2005), pp. 33-54.

a universal language of analysis, if the frequency of references to Clausewitz *et al* is considered; or the spread of the vocabulary of strategy; or the publication in foreign editions of works such as Geoffrey Parker's influential *Military Revolution* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Cambridge, 1996).<sup>12</sup>

However, this approach, a classic diffusionist one, and one that is greatly encouraged by military groups that benefit accordingly, underplays, or generally ignores completely, the extent to which perception is important to the reception of these initiatives. In addition, past and present, there are different national traditions, embedded in specific strategic cultures, that are greatly of consequence in framing particular understandings of tasks and concepts, and thereby strategies. Military institution publications, which are inherently national, seek to address the situation.

In all cases, strategy, and thus its historical grounding, overlaps with the politics of policy-making and with the related public politics of contestation. In both, the use of strategy served (and continues to serve) rhetorical and political purposes.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, although generally in different ways, these purposes also affected the use of the term both within the military and among academic commentators.

The wider overlap with politics includes the crucial role of international relations. Alliances, would-be alliances, and opposing alliances, entailed and entail commitments and possibilities in terms of goals and means that involved the pressures and problems of co-operation. As a result, to offer any account of goals, and means, indeed, of strategy, that does not take adequate note of the international context, its role as an independent variable, and its multiple consequences, is seriously flawed. This is taken further because much current writing, both historical and addressing the present, focuses on the West, and frequently to the detriment of other regions and assumptions. The extent to which the independent and different assumptions and role of others is underplayed is a serious flaw in much of the literature. Moreover, within individual states, military history cannot really be discussed without engaging with foreign affairs and the domestic counterpart.

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<sup>12</sup> For a critique, J. BLACK, *Beyond the Military Revolution* (Basingstoke, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> J. BLACK, *Military Strategy: A Global History* (New Haven, Conn., 2020).

Strategy thus emerges not as a set of documents, but as a practice in an open-ended field of analysis. It can be approached in terms of what needs to be achieved (the tasks), how this will be done (the ways), and the resources employed (the means). Each affects the others, not only in terms of content, but also of how it is understood, and at every level; and both then and subsequently; a situation that undercuts the Whiggish interpretation. The use of individual conflicts as rhetorical and polemical tools, for example ‘World War One,’ or ‘Vietnam,’ or ‘Suez’, and of particular battles, accordingly, for example ‘the Somme’ or ‘Dresden,’ similarly exemplifies this point. Linked to this, comes the role of domestic politics in war, notably, in sustaining support.

Indeed, in both international and domestic terms, strategies emerge in response to, and in order to forward, coalitions of interest; although the domestic dimension of these coalitions tends to be overlooked or, rather, underrated in much writing on military strategy. The means by which these coalitions are formed and re-formed become relevant to the process by which strategies are advanced, debated, and reformulated. Indeed, the ability to maintain such coalitions is a key element of strategic activity, and a central link between domestic and international politics, and war-making. At the same time, the coalitions of World War Two are very different to those of the twenty-first century. It is not clear that Whiggish perspectives, including those of ‘military revolutions,’ are helpful here. Nor do they really help with the analysis of terrorism or, more specifically, of the ‘War on Terror.’

The context and process of coalition formation, both domestic and international, and the related goal-setting, are not static, but, again, it is not clear that any progressivism, Whiggish or otherwise, is appropriate here. That is particularly the case now, as progressivist narratives in international relations all appear exploded, whether they are of international Marxism, or liberal internationalism, or of civilizational conflict, or, as was argued in the 1990s, of America as a unipower at some supposed end of history. So also for earlier overarching explanations, such as religious contest, Western imperialism, or imperial China as the world-state. A new set of analytical suppositions is required.

In terms of conceptualisation, the most helpful is that of fitness for purpose within a context of strategic cultures; provided neither is understood in overly

proscriptive terms, let alone deterministic ones. The concept of strategic culture, a term employed to discuss the context within which military tasks are 'shaped,' is based on the notion that general beliefs, attitudes, and patterns of behaviour, were, and remain, integral to the politics of power, rather than being dependent on the policy circumstances of a particular conjuncture. At the same time, the use of this, as of other concepts, has to address specific historical contexts; and doing so underlines the important roles of politics and contingency, again undermining Whiggish approaches.

In practice, there are frequently competing strategic visions based on contested notions of the strategic culture, and this is linked to debates about taskings, and related issues of doctrine and procurement. The dynamic and contested character of strategic evolution nevertheless includes fundamental changes in the relationships between the constituent parts of the strategic equations of purpose, force, implementation, and effectiveness, and the linked debates. The domestic and international contexts vary, as do the means of interpretation.

The problem for the historian remains how best to address the complex interactions of change and continuity, structure and conjuncture, the West and the wider world, in order to produce an account that is able to identify and probe crucial issues and key questions. The last must not be forgotten. The past is not unproblematic, and that is certainly true of the trajectory and causation of military development.

I would like to thank Kathryn Barbier, Guy Chet and Peter Lorge for their helpful comments on an earlier draft. I have benefited in developing these ideas from opportunities to speak at Ohio University and the University of Exeter.



*Dear Friends*

*I of course give all my lectures without notes, but a number of American friends have asked me to indicate some of the themes I may be covering in my valedictory lecture at Exeter on 30 January, so here goes. I am very busy at present so also do not have the time to do more than sketch a few ideas. These should be read as a sequence to my piece on Military History and the Whig Interpretation.*

*With best wishes, Jeremy*

## Rethinking Military Revolutions

by Jeremy Black

All lectures on concepts in military history face the problem of reconciling the discussion of the literature in a particular area with consideration of the possibilities of the concept itself. This is very much so with the idea of the, or a, military revolution, or, indeed, military revolutions, for there is an impression in usage, an impression that throws light on conceptual, methodological and historiographical confusion. Yet, in both cases, those of the discussion of the literature and the consideration of the possibilities, we also need to face a more fundamental issue, one seen with all processes of conceptualisation, categorisation and analysis, namely what is the purpose of this approach, and why it was framed and developed.

This point can be taken further, if historical work is treated, at least in part, as a branch of political thought (or, if you prefer, as a politicised branch of social science analysis), for that both helps in this consideration, and, more profoundly, anchors it in the context of the period in which the discussion took place. Thus, if we look at the military revolution, the period in question is not 1500-1800, that of the putative revolution, but that from the 1950s, for the most significant texts were those by Michael Roberts and Geoffrey Parker.

Roberts' lecture, published as *The Military Revolution, 1560-1660* (1956), was followed by Parker's longer book, on the period 1500-1800, published in 1988, and, in turn, by a collection edited by Clifford Rogers, *The Military Revolution: Readings on the Military Transformation of Early Modern Europe* (1995). There were also efforts to link that revolution to other areas, for example in Weston Cook's *The Hundred Years War for Morocco: Gunpowder and the Military Revolution in the Early Modern Muslim World* (1994); other periods, notably in Peter Lorge's excellent *The Asian Military Revolution: From Gunpowder to the Bomb* (2008), and an instructive collection, *The Medieval Military Revolution: State, Society and Military Change in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, edited by A. Ayton and J. Price (1998); as well as work taking the idea to the present, as with Rogers' 'Military Revolutions and "Revolutions in Military Affairs": A Historian's Perspective,' in T. Gongora and H. von Riekhof (eds), *Towards a Revolution in Military Affairs? Defense and Security at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century* (2000). Indeed, delivering a plenary lecture at the 2019 conference of the Society for Military History, Parker was able to present the frequency with which the Military Revolution was referred to in book titles in order to claim that it was generally accepted; although in referring only to book titles, he ignored completely the way in which much of the argument, for example by Lorge, challenged both concept and content.

Prior to the period from the 1950s, there are obviously earlier instances of contemporaries writing about major change in warfare in the early-modern period, and indeed in others. Whether or not they implicitly used the concept of a military revolution, as opposed to making remarks about major change, is a matter for discussion; but the modern discussion of the concept does not depend on what are often stray remarks in the past. Indeed, the misleading nature of the evidence is indicated by the degree to which, while it is easy to put together an impressive number of such quotations, the impact in fact is very different if considered at the rate of quotation per year, per country.

Returning to the situation with Roberts, Parker and others, it is therefore pertinent to ask why they described the changes they discussed in terms of a revolution. This question can be approached conceptually, methodologically and historiographically. To take the last, the mature approach, which is to suggest that you work on a matter of interest to yourself which you believe

of some importance to understanding an issue in the past, is not, in fact, the way to launch a career, or obtain research grants or key plenary lectures, or, to be harsh but all-too-accurate, to display, and sustain, self-importance. This is true across life as a whole, and it is no surprise that academic life, which tends disproportionately to collect those of fractured personality and a precarious self-confidence, should be no different.

That does not explain the traction of this particular approach in a specific period. A lot probably rests on the analytical appeal of the idea of revolution. If everything else, from finance to sex, agriculture to art, can have one, why should war miss out? Moreover, as I have tried to show in a number of works, the concept appeared to unlock a number of important issues, notably those of the development and significance of war, its relationship with state and society, and the separation of the past, both into a number of periods, and with a causal relationship between them. Thus, the Military Revolution was much cited as an explanatory device by specialists in other fields.

The usefulness of a concept, however, does not demonstrate its accuracy, and, indeed, vice versa. This is even more the case given the tendency to run together the variety of events and developments in a given period of military history in order to establish a thesis and then, apparently, demonstrate this. In my *Beyond the Military Revolution*, and the volumes in the series before and after, covering in total 1450-1800, I tried to show that Parker's use of evidence had been highly selective, and that much of the world in the period did not match his narrative nor support the argument.

Unfortunately, his 2019 lecture did not display any willingness to engage with this criticism of the methodology, criticism that invalidates, both chronologically and geographically, the idea of a military revolution and the use of it.

So also with Parker following Rogers in taking refuge in borrowing a scientific metaphor, that of punctuated equilibrium. That is done in order to suggest that the subject on which he has particular knowledge, the Low Countries in the 1590s and 1600s, can serve as a paradigm for the entire world, and, indeed, to privilege the particular as a way to explain the general, an understandably favoured technique of many historians. That argument, in practice, does not work in order to support Parker's global narrative. For example, the campaigns in Korea or Hungary in the 1590s were as significant as those in

the Low Countries, but, again, can be unpicked in different ways, and, at any rate, do not serve as a paradigm for the entire world. Moreover, there is in this paradigmatic approach a marked tendency to underplay the complexity of war and the multifaceted character of the understanding, use and effectiveness of capability. Recent work on the significance of ‘small war’ is but one instance of the problems posed by a focus on battles and sieges, whether or not it can be expanded from the small sample that is deployed.

If the early-modern military revolution is a weak concept poorly-applied, what about the notion of military revolution as a whole? Here, again, we have the problem that a concept may be arresting, notably if you attach the term revolution to it, but that does not necessarily help. Indeed, the term revolution may well take away attention from the significance, or otherwise, of the changes in discussion. The term, indeed, is part of the argument by assertion that is such a troubling aspect of academic processes at present.

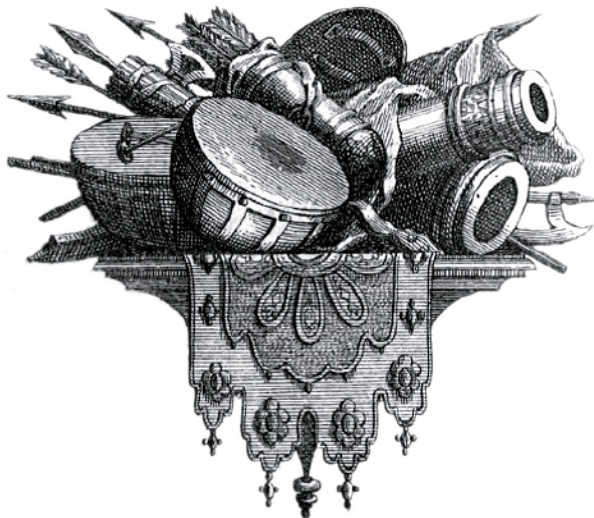
Revolution tends to mean a lack of attention to incrementalism, as well as to the significance of interaction between a variety of factors including contextual elements. In military terms, it is the ‘magic bullet’ approach, and that approach, whatever the matter in focus, tends to be misleading. So, for example, the nuclear age saw major defeats for the nuclear powers and, indeed, their limited capability in the face of those they could not overcome was readily apparent.

The relationship between capability and impact is always a complex one, not least in terms of the ability of powers to devise and implement anti-weapons, anti-tactics, and anti-strategies, to cope with capability gaps. Moreover, the extent to which political factors can counter capability advantages is a constant, indeed helping to centre military history within general history, rather than seeing it as a different branch which should require a separate analysis.

Talk of revolutions lastly served the modern agenda of military affairs. It is no accident that the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) advocates from the 1990s and early 2000s were particular advocates of the (early-modern European) Military Revolution, because they sought to place the RMA in an historical process that threw light on the significance of their own supposed development. This was understandable but also misleading, and, by the mid-2000s, as the RMA ran into the sands of Iraq and Afghanistan, so it appeared

less credible to consider the analysis as a helpful paradigm. Here we might, instead, break down the situation into component parts and suggest that it is possible to have a transformative change in possibilities, for example steam power or manned flight, without that necessarily altering other, let alone all, aspects of the situation. Whether or not that situation constitutes a revolution underlines the extent to which that is not necessarily a helpful term. Nor is the application of it in modern policy terms anything other than misleading.

These points, however, do not address the extent to which a thesis of limited intellectual value can in practice still be of considerable pedagogic or political value, not least because of its very catchall imprecision. Military history is particularly prone to this situation due to the character of its stakeholders, notably the general public and the services, and this contributes to its under-theorised character. Yet, there is also need for the re-evaluation that new concepts can offer. One from the 1950s of dubious value should be retired and others offered in its place. 'Fitness for purpose' appears to me to have more to offer as it returns attention to contingent and contextual factors, and notably those of tasking. The last is key to the evaluation of both capability and effectiveness, and thus to the consideration of change and development in both.





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