

FLORIBERT BAUDET

# Ranke and Files: History and the Military



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TUTTI I DIRITTI RISERVATI

Nadir Media Srl - Via Giuseppe Veronese, 22 - 00146 Roma  
[info@nadirmedia.it](mailto:info@nadirmedia.it)

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# Ranke and Files: History and the Military<sup>1</sup>

by FLORIBERT BAUDET

**ABSTRACT.** This article addresses the question of whether recent developments in the field of human rights could enhance the position of military historians. To answer this question, an analysis is given of the current state of military history and its relation to the military. By and large the military expects to tap into the magisterial potential of the past. Most professional military historians today would hesitate to claim that the past teaches clear-cut “lessons”, but unimpeded access to sources and freedom to disseminate their findings are crucial for a better understanding of past operations and, hence, of the nature of war. Such an understanding may be reached by combining Collingwood’s theory of re-enactment and Huizinga’s historical sensation. The article further identifies several bottlenecks that complicate the task of a professional military historian. These are political, institutional and methodological in nature. It argues that historians on the payroll of the military are not likely to invoke the nascent right to the truth to increase their leeway. Instead, a code of professional ethics may help historians working for the military to widen their academic freedom enabling them to make, as Michael Howard argued, both professions wiser forever.

## *I. Introduction<sup>2</sup>*

**I**n his seminal *Foundations of the Science of War* (1926) the British Major General, and prominent military theorist John Frederick Charles Fuller (1878-1966) railed against what he perceived as the refusal of the military to truly study the past, and learn from it war as it really was. By obstinately clinging to tradition, officers deprived themselves of a tool

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2 Floribert BAUDET, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of Strategy at the Faculty of Military Sciences at the Netherlands Defence Academy. The views expressed in this contribution are his own.

to make sense of the complexities of warfare and were condemned to repeat the mistakes of their predecessors. A scientific study of past wars would have revealed the true nature of warfare, and disclosed the likely shapes it was going to take in the future.<sup>3</sup> This refusal had resulted in the carnage of the Great War, he wrote. Fuller's criticism is echoed in the oft-quoted commonplace that the military always prepares for the previous war in order to fight the next one. Both this commonplace and Fuller's criticisms assume that it is possible to distill clear-cut lessons from the past, and that it is obstinacy, or a lack of mental stamina, not to do so.

In this contribution, I will assess whether these attitudes toward the past – that is, positivism, and the veneration of tradition – have changed with the advent of academically trained historians in the service of the military. Do military organizations still treat the past as a mirror of the present, a pool of knowledge from which to draw clear-cut lessons? What do they hope to learn from studying the past? Are professional historians who have been taught to question the magisterial potential of the past and who are accustomed to the idea of academic freedom, able to provide the findings the military wants? What tensions, if any, do exist between them? Such tensions no doubt would involve academic freedom, that is the right to teach, write and conduct research without outside pressures. Could the emerging “right to the truth”, a human right that was first formulated in reaction to large-scale human rights violations such as war crimes, or codes of ethics that several civilian associations of historians have developed, help to overcome these tensions? Could military historians invoke these instruments to enhance their positions vis-à-vis the military?

I will focus on Western military organizations, that theoretically at least are most susceptible to the idea of accountability of public institutions. Accordingly, the emphasis will be on Western military historiography – that is, the study of the past of the aforementioned organizations. One reason is that this is the historiography I am familiar with. Secondly, an analysis of the relation between Western military organizations and the historians they employ, could

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3 John F.C. FULLER, *The foundations of the science of war*, Hutchinson, London, 1926, republished at <http://www.cgsc.edu/carl/resources/csi/fuller2/fuller2.asp> (accessed 5 February 2010).

benefit military historians elsewhere since the Western army model has become dominant across the globe.

## *II. The Uses of History in the Military*

For most of recorded history, philosophers, historians and soldiers have argued that history is an important source of practical knowledge. Battlefield success was attributed to knowledge of military history<sup>4</sup>. In fact, it was this belief that inspired Athenian general Thucydides (ca. 460-400 BCE) to write about the Peloponnesian War, an endeavour that may be considered the first scholarly research in history.<sup>5</sup> Military writers of later ages such as Polybius (ca. 203-120), Caesar (ca. 100-44) and Macchiavelli (1469-1527) followed in his footsteps. Studying ‘great captains’ and their biographies produced great captains, or so it was believed. Alexander the Great (356-323) is known to have kept his personal copy of the Iliad and turned to it when he was in need of tactical advice.<sup>6</sup> Maurice of Nassau (1567-1625) and his cousin William Louis (1560-1620) studied the classics with Justus Lipsius (1547-1606); Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus (1594-1632) is also said to have explored them. All three used the insights they gained in organizing and drilling their armies.<sup>7</sup>

From the late seventeenth century onward a change occurred. Military writers were now tempted to derive eternal laws and enduring principles from

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4 Austrian archduke Joseph II, for instance, explained Frederic the Great’s battlefield success in this way. Quoted in Ludwig REINERS, *Frederick the Great, a Biography*, G.P. Putnam and Sons, New York, 1960, pp. 247-248.

5 THUCYDIDES, *The Peloponnesian War*, 1.22.4. On Thucydides’ relevance for today’s military see Paul RAHE, «Thucydides as Educator», in Williamson MURRAY and Richard H. SINREICH (Eds.), *The Past as Prologue. The Importance of History to the Military Profession*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 95-110.

6 PLUTARCHUS, *Alexander*, 8.1

7 The argument was first put forward in Gerhard OESTREICH, «Der Römische Stoizismus und die Oranische Heeresreform», *Historische Zeitschrift*, 176 (1953), pp. 17-43 and repeated many times since. From the late 1990s onward the impact of the Roman example has been regularly questioned, see: Cees SCHULTEN, «Prins Maurits (1567-1625); legerhervormer en vernieuwer van de krijgskunde, of trendvolger?», *Armamentaria*, 35 (2001), pp. 6-22. In his forthcoming contribution to the military history of the Netherlands series (forthcoming 2011), O. van Nimwegen will also address this question.

past wars. Somewhat later, the idea that the systematic and rational study of campaigns produces skills that can be successfully applied in battle, underlay the foundation of military schools and academies and also the development of General Staffs. In the nineteenth century the highly influential Swiss theorist, General Antoine Henri baron de Jomini (1779-1869), and scores of lesser-known writers, wrote in the same reductionist vein, focusing on the identification and application of the principles of war. Their work offered great teaching material which ensured that their approach remained dominant at military academies until well after the Second World War.<sup>8</sup> Once identified, such immutable principles also found their way to the doctrines of the military where they were translated in practical prescripts for action. Notwithstanding his vitriolic comments on the endeavours of previous generations of writers, John Fuller was also part of this tradition since he believed that assiduous and objective study of warfare would reveal the laws governing it and expose future trends. From his own analysis of military history he deduced four, and then eight, enduring principles of war that found their way into the British doctrine. Eventually he settled for nine.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to note that this reductionist approach was not the only way history was studied by the military. An alternative approach was developed by Prussian General and theorist Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831). His approach to the past was rather different from that of his reductionist contemporaries. Clausewitz held that the magisterial potential of the past could only be accessed by the careful and detailed study of a single particular phenomenon. One was to work one's way up from the minutest details to the strategic level and not the other way around, as many of his contemporaries did, heaping together various cases and imposing models on them. Clausewitz's approach to history was therefore not a mathematical reductionist approach, but a rather more historicist one.<sup>10</sup> According to Clausewitz, there are indeed constant

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8 Stephen MORILLO and Michael P. PAVKOVIC, *What Is Military History?*, Polity, Cambridge, 2006, 29-36. Cf. Peter PARET (Ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy. From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986, 143ff.

9 FULLER, cit. They are concentration, distribution, direction, surprise, endurance, determination, offensive action, security and mobility. Fuller conceived them as three partly overlapping arrowheads that suggest a forceful thrust towards 'the objective'. See diagram 19 in the same volume.

10 Carl von CLAUSEWITZ, *Vom Kriege*, II, 6, 91.

elements in warfare – war is about organized violence and serves a political end – but the shape it takes is dependent on the interplay between rational choice, irrational factors such as hatred and the use of violence, and chance. This interplay exists on each warring side, and of course in the exchanges on the battlefield, and is different in each era.<sup>11</sup> He would have agreed with Ranke's observation that every era is unique unto God.<sup>12</sup>

Although Clausewitz received much praise, there are innumerable examples of officers that either prided themselves for not having read him, or failed to understand him when they had. In fact, many who claim to think Clausewitzian actually think along the lines of Jomini, and the Clausewitzian view of history has only had a limited impact on the way most militaries treat the past.<sup>13</sup> The Jominian model has remained dominant.

Two developments in the twentieth century brought about a fundamental change in the way military organizations treated the past. One of these was the atomic bomb. In 1946, Bernard Brodie (1910-1978), an American who would become a leading theorist on nuclear deterrence, concluded that the tasks of

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11 This is Clausewitz's 'wunderliche Dreifältigkeit' (remarkable trinity). Rationality is the attribute of the political leadership, hatred the motivating element in the people and violence is the domain of generals and armies. According to this model, pre-Napoleonic warfare, though violent, was limited since it rarely involved the people and was not existential. Napoleonic warfare by contrast involved the whole nation, either by conscription or by appealing to national survival. As a result Napoleonic warfare came close to embodying, in Clausewitz's view, 'absolute war'.

12 Even if we accept as Chris Lorenz holds, that Ranke's 'eigentlich' was not so much about empiricism as it was about showing the correctness of his *Ideenlehre*, Clausewitz's ideas show a resemblance: setting out to find the essence of warfare – "absolute war" – he was compelled to conclude that each era had its own way of waging war, fitting for that particular era. Clausewitz and Ranke knew each other and Clausewitz may be seen as a precursor to Ranke's historicism, Peter PARET, *Clausewitz and the State: The Man, His Theories, and His Times*, Oxford University Press, New York & Oxford, third edition, 2007, p. xv.

13 Clausewitz was recommended by Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, the architect of Prussia's battlefield success against Austria (1866) and France (1870-1871), who was said to have claimed that there were only three books worth reading: the Bible, the Iliad, and Vom Kriege. On the reception of Clausewitz's ideas, see for instance: Christopher BASSFORD, *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America, 1815-1945*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994 and also Hugh STRACHAN and Andreas HERBERG-ROTHE, *Clausewitz in the Twenty-first Century*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007.

the military had changed forever: "Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them".<sup>14</sup> The advent of the atomic age and the problems it posed drastically reduced the relevance of the past, since never before had the existence of mankind itself depended on individual decisions.<sup>15</sup>

Less devastating than the atomic bomb, but equally disruptive to the relevance of past experiences was the advent of modern production techniques in the first decades of the twentieth century, when it was found that every action and process could be broken down into a sequence of smaller, ever-repeatable acts that conformed to a fixed pattern. Similar ideas were introduced in the United States Army by Elihu Root (1845-1937), who served as Secretary of the Army from 1899 to 1904. The armed forces were conceived as a company, that could be managed in much the same way as civilian companies. This depersonalization of military 'production' was strongly anti-historical. What was useful had been internalized in procedures, doctrines, and drills, and the rest could be discarded without regret.<sup>16</sup> The view of the military as a company has remained influential ever since. This is in large part because of the increasingly complex nature of the military and its logistics in particular, of the challenges it faces and of the weapons it employs.

If we are to believe mainly American writers, these developments have resulted in a situation in which military history is in constant danger of being excised, not only from curricula at civilian institutions, but from curricula at military schools, academies and universities as well.<sup>17</sup> In fact, in the 1970s

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14 Bernard BRODIE (Ed.), *The Absolute Weapon. Atomic Power and World Order*, Harcourt, Brace and co., New York, 1946, p. 76.

15 Walter MILLIS, *Military History*, American Historical Association, Washington, 1961, p. 18. Cf. Ben SCHOENMAKER and Floribert BAUDET, *Officieren aan het woord. De geschiedenis van de Militaire Spectator*, Boom, Amsterdam, 2007.

16 Eric SIBUL, «Military History in Professional Military Education To Prepare for a Complex and Dangerous World», unpublished paper presented at ISMS, 26 November 2009; Richard H. SINNREICH, «Awkward Partners: Military History and American Military Education», in Williamson MURRAY and Richard SINNREICH (Eds.), *The Past as Prologue. The Importance of History to the Military Profession*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 55-77.

17 Jeremy BLACK, *Rethinking Military History*, Routledge, London, 2004, pp. 26-27; John A. LYNN, «The Embattled Future of Academic Military History», *Journal of Military History*, 61 (1997) pp. 777-789; John J. MILLER, «Sounding Taps: Why Military



the past made an interesting come-back. This was caused in large part by the Vietnam War and the Arab-Israeli Wars of 1967 and 1973. The strained civil-military relations and the experience of defeat in what turned out to be an irregular war in Vietnam, and the maneuver warfare in the Middle East led some in the US armed forces to rediscover the past. They avidly studied German operations in the Second World War, but they also looked for guidance to the Chinese theorist Sun Tzu (fifth century BCE) who had a few things to say about irregular warfare. Clausewitz's warnings about starting wars without a clear political goal and his admonition to identify the enemy's center of gravity without which the latter was compelled to lay down his arms, were also taken to heart, at least for a while. Most Western armed forces followed suit. This is not to say that the view of the military as a huge company had receded. This view was amended to allow for a 'reintroduction of the past', so to speak, but military history never recovered its pre-1914 dominance in military education.

To conclude, there *has* been a change since Fuller's day. In our era, many in the military consider the past to be irrelevant, mainly so because of the complexity of the organization and the advent of hi-tech. Nonetheless, even in the atomic age the military never stopped producing doctrines and precepts that were essentially based on past examples and were characterized by a strong degree of reductionism in the Jominian sense. The past not only provided practical knowledge, but also the raw data that proved the existence of immutable principles of war. It seemed to offer clear examples of do's-and-don'ts, which can be internalized and incorporated in training programs.

This focus on learning (in the widest sense) is crucial. What the military is looking for in the past and elsewhere are tools for understanding war and preparing its commanders and units for it. Warfare is the most confusing, chaotic and stressful activity humans engage in, and it is believed that an increased understanding of this activity would enable commanders and units to perform better. To this end, past battles and campaigns are studied because they would offer an armchair version of military exercises, and partially remedy a lack of

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History Is Being Retired» at <<http://www.nationalreview.com>>, 9 October 2006. The situation is different in the UK and the Netherlands.

personal experience in war.<sup>18</sup> Battlefields are visited to obtain insights in the importance of terrain and geography, and leadership. Nowadays, this is often done in combination with simulations on the basis of the mathematics oriented method of operational analysis, that are often based on historical examples themselves.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, knowledge of history is held to be a vital element in unit cohesion, which is an indispensable quality in battle effectiveness. The underlying assumption in each of these endeavours is that the past is relevant and that its study is to sharpen intuition and provide insights that can be applied in future operations.

### *III. Varieties of Military History*

Military history is in a somewhat different position than other fields of historical inquiry. In the first place, most military historians are on the payroll of the ministry of Defense and much of what they write is commissioned history. Secondly, unlike some other historical fields, military history has managed to attract a large non-academic audience. Strangely enough, this popularity among non-academic readers is often claimed to be an important cause for the relatively low standing of military history among academic historians.<sup>20</sup> In my opinion, however, this is not the main reason. Far more important are its subject matter<sup>21</sup>, its predominantly commissioned nature and the fact that there are different types of military history with different levels of sophistica-

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18 Williamson MURRAY, «Thoughts on Military History and the Profession of Arms», in MURRAY and SINNREICH, cit., pp. 78-92, at 87-88; Michael HOWARD, «The Uses and Abuses of Military History», *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*, 107 (1962), pp. 4-10.

19 For instance the Netherlands Defence Academy's curriculum contains one exercise which is geographically set on the 1944 battlegrounds around Arnhem and in Zeeland; its subject, however, is a humanitarian intervention in a fictitious African country. *Note*: in 2014, this tour was dropped from the bachelor programmes' curriculum but a similar exercise is still part of the military training.

20 MORILLO and PAVKOVIC, *Military History*, p. 38. Compare LYNN, cit.; Victor D. HANSON, «The Dilemmas of the Contemporary Military Historian», in Elisabeth FOX-GENOVESE and Elisabeth LASCH-QUINN (Eds.), *Reconstructing History: the Emergence of a New Historical Society*, Routledge, London, 1999, pp. 198-201.

21 Cfr. <<http://warhistorian.org/wordpress/?p=2573#more-2573>> (accessed 17 November 2010).

tion and quality. Academic scholars have been tempted to heap all these types together<sup>22</sup>, but for a better understanding of each we have to differentiate. The following discussion is based more on the work of Stephen Morillo and Michael Pavkovic, who by and large focus on methodological sophistication, than on that of Allan Millet, whose typology is based on the function of military writing. Some degree of cross-fertilization between their classifications is necessary to fully appreciate the characteristics of each variety.<sup>23</sup> I will show that academically trained military historians do not monopolize their field. This is an important difference with some other fields of historical inquiry that generally lack a wider non-academic audience. Most importantly, for the military this means that it can choose the history of its liking.

A first type of studying the military past is through *re-enactment* – that is the ‘re-creation’ of the past as a pastime. Professional historians often treat this type with disdain, or with suspicion. However, they overlook the fact that serious reenactment entails a considerable amount of knowledge of many aspects of a soldier’s life in the past. Drills are frequently studied and repeated meticulously.

Often an attempt is also made to recreate the mindset and physical appearance of the soldiers. While it cannot be established with certainty whether the re-enactors actually succeed in summoning, as it were, the mental outlook of their examples<sup>24</sup>, the same applies to the professional academic historian. Re-enactors do, however, have the advantage that they actually wear the uniforms, undergo the drills and fire the arms. To the extent that Johan Huizinga’s “historical sensation” is a valid concept, and it has been experiencing a revival in recent years<sup>25</sup>, it could well be argued that re-enactors may claim with some

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22 Charles ESDAILLE, *The Peninsular War*, Penguin books, London, 2003, p. x, quoted in Black, cit., p. 26.

23 MORILLO and PAVKOVIC, cit.; Allan R. MILLET, «American Military History: Clio and Mars as ‘Pards’» in David CHARTERS, Marc MILNER, J. Brent WILSON (Eds.), *Military History and the Military Profession*, Praeger, Westport, 1992, pp. 3-22.

24 Cf. Alexander COOK, «The Use and Abuse of Historical Re-enactment: Thoughts on Recent Trends in Public History», *Criticism*, 46 (2004), pp. 487-496. Tjark BLOKZIJL, «Historical re-enactment en de Amerikaanse Burgeroorlog», *Groniek*, 180 (2008), pp. 255-268, at 258.

25 See for instance the recent work of Frank ANKERSMIT, *Sublime Historical Experience*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, Cambridge, 2005.

justification that their business is to trigger this.<sup>26</sup> Like experimental archaeology, where experiments make up for the lack of written sources, serious re-enactment has produced valuable knowledge.<sup>27</sup> The military usually views this type of military history with disdain, primarily since war is not a pastime.

A second type of military history is probably best characterized as the *I was there / Lest we forget*-type. Generally speaking, it is didactic, with more than a presentist touch. The oldest type of military history writing, often with a focus on the commanding general – the ‘great captain’, it was the most important single cause for the scorn on the part of the academic historians. Many authors come from a military background and served in the campaigns or missions they describe, or apply their personal knowledge and experience to other campaigns. Similar are the military instructors in military schools and academies, who frequently teach from personal experience. Although they often provide valuable insights, their views and ideas do not necessarily reflect scholarly views. However, these seem credible since “I was there”. Although their military background is obviously useful, it has serious disadvantages. Soldiers are trained to be loyal and not to doubt or question. This is an important, even necessary quality when in battle; it is however counterproductive when writing the history of that same battle.<sup>28</sup> However useful their insights, these may well pertain to the way soldiers think rather than to what actually happened. As such, this type of writing is counterproductive when preparing for the next one.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, when these authors engage in a critical discussion, the didactic or cathartic element tends to dominate, resulting in a somewhat ahistorical approach. Rather than analyzing why certain decisions were taken, they focus on how historical actors should have acted and decided.<sup>30</sup>

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26 To be sure, Huizinga seems to consider the historical sensation as something that cannot be *summoned*. In 1999 I had one such historical sensation resulting from re-enactment when a ‘Roman infantry unit’ conducted a charge in my direction, war cries, flickering helmets, spears and all.

27 MORILLO and PAVKOVIC, cit., 101. Cf. Jan P. PUYPE, «Het Staatse leger en prins Maurits; wegbereider van de moderne legers», *Armamentaria* 35 (2001), pp. 32-47 at 36.

28 Basil LIDDELL HART, *Why Don't We Learn from History?*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1971, pp. 25-26.

29 LIDDELL HART, cit., p. 25. Here he seems to echo Fuller's criticism.

30 Peter BOER's book on aviation in the wars of decolonization of the Dutch East Indies: *De jachtvliegtuigen, Army Co-Operation- en lesvliegtuigen van de Militaire Lucht-*

Often such works are written with a view to make sense of events that are inherently chaotic and incomprehensible – which easily results in simplification – or with the intention to rehabilitate. Examples include books that reframe the defeat of the Netherlands in May 1940 as a contribution to the eventual allied victory in the Second World War.<sup>31</sup> Such books may perform an important emotional function in the societies for which they are written. To the military this type is also most welcome. It offers valuable insights, and most authors engaged in it have personally experienced warfare. This type may also bolster domestic support for the army. However, historical accuracy or plausibility is not the main concern.

To a certain extent the same characteristic applies to the third type, the genre of *unit histories*, in which unit cohesion is fostered by identifying so-called ‘traditions’. Such narratives serve to transmit the (alleged) past accomplishments and peculiarities of a given unit, often dating back to the unit’s formative period. This type of history is also considered to be very useful since unit cohesion vitally increases battle effectiveness and helps coping with casualties and adversity. From this perspective, it need not come as a surprise that this type has a respectable pedigree within the military. It finds expression in the use of battle standards that are embellished with names of historical battles, in the existence of commissions on tradition, in the naming of ships and the like.<sup>32</sup> Such efforts may produce the desired cohesion, but once again historical accuracy does not seem to be its main driving force.<sup>33</sup>

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*vaart KNIL 1945-1950*, Bataafsche Leeuw, Amsterdam, 2009 is an example. His analysis that if the Dutch had had more planes they would have won that war, misrepresents the true causes of the defeat – namely that the inhabitants of the archipelago decided they could do without the Dutch. In addition, it is questionable that war-planes could have produced a different outcome in the counterinsurgency operations the Dutch conducted since it is hard to see hearts and minds won from the air only. A successful counterinsurgency-operation requires *manpower* and a viable political vision. The Dutch had neither.

31 This is expressed in the series of works by Dutch Lieutenant Colonel (ret.) E. H. Brongers. For a scholarly analysis of the same war, see Piet KAMPHUIS and Herman AMERSFOORT (Eds.), *May 1940. The Battle for the Netherlands*, Brill, Leyden, 2010.

32 A nice example is the Dutch Royal Decree n° 81, 11 February 1831 that there has to be a HMS *Van Speyk*, after the officer who preferred to blow his ship to smithereens rather than lose it to the Belgians on 5 February 1831 – taking with him most of his crew and those who tried to wrest the vessel from him.

33 After the Second World War, for instance, when the Dutch army was rebuilt almost

At least in part because it was developed at universities rather than in military headquarters or trenches, a fourth brand, *war and society*, has won a considerable degree of academic respectability.<sup>34</sup> It came into existence as a reaction against the older brands of military history, and in a sense as a counterpoise to these since its genesis owed much to the uneasiness of mainly American intellectuals over the Vietnam War. Its methodology and outlook were greatly influenced by the social sciences, still another reason for its respectability in academic circles.<sup>35</sup> Its main achievement was to stress that wars do not occur in a social vacuum, as older ‘drum and trumpet’ types of military historiography often seemed to suggest. War and society historians analyzed the effects of warfare on societies and the impact of societies on warfare. In the process, however, their attention often shifted away from actual military operations to the extent that “armies were recruited, organized, fed, paid, and sent home; they sometimes marched, but they never fought”.<sup>36</sup> This markedly reduced its utility for the military.

In the 1970s, the awareness of this deficiency supported the creation a fifth type of military history, known as *operational history*. Historical sections of General Staffs and military academies now began to apply the scholarly methods and standards that had long been lacking. Another reason encouraging this development was that increasingly the military started to employ historians with a formal academic training. These historians, both civilians and professional soldiers, found that they could not merely copy the war and society approach. They focused on the plans and actual operations of the armed forces<sup>37</sup> rather than on the society that raised them. This new approach differed

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from scratch, it was decreed (MB 19 August 1946 MK, Bureau 2, n° 917; standing order 1946-286) that new units were to ‘continue’ the traditions of the old pre-war ones that had been dissolved by the German occupiers.

34 David CHARTERS, Marc MILNER, J. Brent WILSON, «Introduction» in CHARTERS, MILNER and WILSON, cit., xiv.

35 MILLET, cit., p. 11.

36 MORILLO and PAVKOVIC, cit., p. 41. Cf. Donald A. YERXA, *Recent Themes in Military History: Historians in Conversation*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, SC, 2008, p. 5.

37 Focus on operations does not mean one cannot study armed forces that rarely fight. Operational plans, economic preparations, ideas about training programs, morale, and the like are common to all armed forces regardless of their strength or fighting record. See convincingly: Wim KLINKERT, *Van Waterloo tot Uruzgan: de militaire identiteit*

substantially from traditional battle histories: the emphasis was not so much on the “great captains” but on the soldiers that did the fighting.<sup>38</sup> In their work operational historians used concepts and ideas

taken from fields such as anthropology and psychology and paid due attention to heuristic and epistemological problems much in the same way as their fellow, civilian-employed historians would do.

Operational history, in many ways a blend between war and society and the older battle histories, seems tailor-made for at least some of the needs of the military, but its position is complicated by two factors. One is that the older and methodologically less sophisticated varieties of military history have not disappeared. On the contrary, there is still a large civil and military audience for those varieties, and reprints of less sophisticated varieties are readily available. In spite of the emergence of operational history, the military still displays a keen interest in unit histories, the I was there-type, and the development of doctrines and prescripts based on historical examples. Thus, academically trained military historians do not monopolize their field. The other complicating factor is methodological in nature. To this we will now turn.

#### *IV. Methodology in the Age of the ‘Thinking Soldier’*

The current philosophy of many military academies in the West is to train ‘thinking soldiers’, who are able to critically evaluate situations, plans and intelligence, and to come up with rational decisions or advice based on those evaluations. Such ‘thinking soldiers’ would fit the threefold task of contemporary (predominantly Western) officers: they are to fight, to negotiate, and to engage in development aid for which classical military skills and drills are no longer sufficient.<sup>39</sup> As we have seen, knowledge of the past is considered an

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*van Nederland*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2008).

38 One example, among many, is Michael D. DOUBLER, *Closing with the Enemy. How GIs fought the War in Europe, 1944-1945*, Kansas University Press, Lawrence KS, 1994.

39 Ch. Charles KRULAK, «The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War», *Marines Magazine*, January 1999 at <[http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/strategic\\_corporal.htm](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/strategic_corporal.htm)> (accessed 1 March 2010); Lynda LIDDY, «The Strategic Cor-

important asset for soldiers. This is even more so for ‘thinking soldiers’, but arguably this military history will have to be the Clausewitzian, operational one. Today’s soldiers may choose from four different types of military history that the military appears to consider equally valuable. From a methodological point of view however they are quite dissimilar. Unit histories and the *I was there/Lest we forget* brand are often rather superficial in the sense that little attention is paid to establishing what actually happened or whether the memory is correct. The fact, however, that one has been there, adds credibility to one’s account, however biased it may be. Both with unit histories and the *I was there/lest we forget* brand findings and experiences may well be welded in the mold of desirability in order to produce a neat account that conforms to pre-existing ideas. For unit histories this is understandable in view of the purpose they serve, but what lessons can be learned when the information is incorrect or biased? The same applies, by and large, to the way most military organizations used to find their lessons learned. Methodological dilemmas, for instance whether accounts of past battles were truthful reflections of what happened, and epistemological problems of establishing causality, more often than not were passed over. As a result, failure in battle was attributed primarily to a failure to adhere to the principles. No doubt this is still current practice in most military organizations.

By contrast, operational history is methodologically up to date, that is, it operates on the basis of the same (diverging) qualitative criteria as historians in other fields. Interestingly, and this sets them apart from their civilian-employed colleagues, in analyzing war and the decisions taken in it, operational military historians perhaps unwittingly combine two mutually exclusive epistemological

theories. On the one hand, they by and large apply R. G. Collingwood’s theory of re-enactment. This theory is not to be confused with the pastime of re-enactment, discussed above. On the other, however, they hope to experience and then evoke in others a historical sensation in Huizinga’s, and, more recently, Ankersmit’s sense. However, each has its merits and cannot do

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poral: Some Requirements in Training and Education», *Australian Army Journal*, 2 (2005), pp. 139-148. Three Block war is also called 3D warfare: the Ds stand for diplomacy, development and defense.



without the other.

In Collingwood's view, "(t)he historian [...] is investigating not mere events [...] but actions. [...] His main task is to think himself into this action, to discern the thought of its agent". In making his point, Collingwood used the example of a general during battle. In order to understand his decisions, we have to re-think the battle. We have to know what the general knew and thinking what he thought we may be able to reach a fairly accurate understanding of his decisions. He continued: "The history of thought, and therefore all history, is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian's own mind".<sup>40</sup> While feelings cannot be reproduced, it is possible to re-enact thought – thought is an act that leaves identifiable traces. It manifests itself in words, and in other ways.<sup>41</sup> Re-enactment is hardly an effortless activity, though - it requires hard thinking.<sup>42</sup>

The theory assumes that actors are fundamentally rational and that events can be traced back to clear causes. This corresponds to the military's view of decisionmaking as a rational, effects-driven process. However, it cannot be established beyond doubt that actors act and decide rationally in situations of stress and crisis, even if they are trained to do so. Human behavior thus becomes much more difficult to explain. Causal relationships are equally difficult to identify in the chaos of battle, or after it. It is unlikely that anybody would be able to present a coherent and truthful account of their personal exploits in such a situation. Only by systematically analyzing and contrasting such accounts would it be possible to get a fair impression of what happened. But we cannot be sure that this is the whole truth. We can only reconstruct so much, and the remainder of our account by necessity has all the elements and limitations of a construction. Even so, for the rational elements in war Collingwood's approach may be helpful.

However, war is not only a rational enterprise. Many acts and decisions in war come about in a mixture of rational deliberation, and intuition, or even

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40 Robin G. COLLINGWOOD, *The Idea of History [1946]. Revised Edition with Lectures 1926-1928, Edited by Jan van der Dussen*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994, p. 215.

41 COLLINGWOOD, cit., 293, 297; Stein HELGEBY, *Action as History: The Historical Thought of R. G. Collingwood*, Imprint, Exeter, 2005, p. 10.

42 Fred INGLIS, *History Man*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2009, pp. 215-216.

just impulse. While it may be true that such intuitive and impulsive actions cannot be re-enacted in the way rational decisions might, limiting ourselves to the sole theory of Collingwood's would preclude the possibility of fruitfully analyzing these vital ingredients in warfare. Leaving them out is inadmissible: it would reduce war to something which it is not. It is not a game of chess in which generals move pawns at will. Rather it is a manifestation of the interplay between chance, rational, irrational, and even subconscious factors. For instance, the ability to intuitively read a battlefield, or a situation, is a vital asset for commanders at every level.

This ability parallels the intuitive reading of the past inherent in Huizinga's historical sensation. From a theoretical perspective, this almost metaphysical experience is not unproblematic. And yet, most historians will recognize this sensation. In military history, the idea that one can actually learn something when visiting historical battlefields produced the educational format of the battlefield tour. At the Netherlands Defence Academy, for instance, we take our students on a tour of the 1944 Battle of Arnhem. Together we analyze the decision-making process before and during the battle, thus re-thinking it much along the lines of Collingwood's ideas. But we also hope to evoke the battle when we tell of the hundreds of airplanes that filled the air on that sunny September afternoon, and the thousands of parachutists who jumped, or when we mention that Lieutenant Colonel John Frost's men, who held the northern end of the Arnhem bridge for 88 hours, resorted to taking benzedrin pills to fight hunger, fatigue and fear. Here, we see the historical sensation at work. Together, these approaches to the past make for a learning experience that no classroom can provide.

The underlying assumption in both is that there actually is a reality of the past that the historian can grasp, that is, historical truth. For the military this is crucial. Without it, there would be no use studying the past. However, with the arrival of formally trained historians at military academies an unexpected problem arose. The sophisticated methodology of operational historians made them less convinced that they actually can succeed in fully grasping, or reconstructing, the reality of the past. This understanding of the limitations to our knowledge, the realization that the past is indeed different from the present and the fear of anachronism that resulted from it, converged to produce a rather skeptical attitude to the idea of learning ready-made lessons from the

past. In contrast, with their belief in immutable principles, military organizations are inclined to project historical phenomena both forward and backward. They essentially hold that history repeats itself because human nature does not change.<sup>43</sup> Even the eminent theorist and historian Basil Liddell Hart took some pride in working according to this procedure.<sup>44</sup>

This results in an uneasy paradox. The brand of military history with the best possibilities of establishing what actually happened, is the least useful to the military when it comes to distilling practical lessons, that commodity which military organizations crave most for. By virtue of their methodology and their professional ethics, operational historians cannot teach such practical lessons, provide clear solutions for problems in the present, nor predict. We are no prophets.<sup>45</sup>

Academically trained military historians can however provide something much more valuable. We can offer an idea of the complexity and the chaos, the untidiness of war. We can show how and why decisions were taken, both rationally and intuitively. We may identify underlying patterns of thought (the so-called “military culture”) that influenced them, and we can show the actual outcome of those decisions. In so doing, we may be able to instill an intuitive understanding of what war is all about and what cadets and midshipmen may expect. This understanding will encourage them to ask the right questions. In the end, it is this approach to the past that may enable officer cadets and midshipmen to truly become ‘thinking soldiers’.

Logically, this magisterial potential of past battles and operations can only be accessed when the aim is to establish what actually happened. Only then will it be possible to re-think, or evoke the event. This is only possible when historians have unimpeded access to the sources pertaining to these events and when they are free to disseminate their conclusions. This is not only desirable from a scholarly perspective. If the military is to learn from abysmal failures, covering them up, distorting them or downplaying their importance surely is

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43 William C. FULLER, jr., «What Is a Military Lesson?», Thomas G. MAHNKEN and Joseph A. MAIOLO, *Strategic Studies: A Reader*, eds., Routledge, London, 2008, pp. 34-50.

44 LIDDELL HART, cit., p. 16.

45 Cf. Michael HOWARD, *The Lessons of History*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991, p. 8; FULLER, «Lesson», cit.

the worst way to proceed. The only possible way to learn and to prevent the recurrence of these failures is to involve professionals who were specifically trained to conduct research. These may be historians, but also scholars from other disciplines.

However, it is pivotal that they study the past for what it is, not for what it should have been. The use of theory can be helpful but it cannot replace critical analysis, and if information is lacking we should be very careful to derive the missing data from a theory.

Crucially, without access to the sources and without the freedom to discuss, the resulting picture will be distorted and biased. This effectively destroys the possibility of learning from the past. Equally important is that researchers are free to select their own subject and case studies. Although military authorities may think differently, this is again not only a scholarly interest. As Liddell Hart wrote: “Camouflaged history not only conceals faults and deficiencies that could otherwise be remedied, but engenders false confidence – and false confidence underlies most of the failures that military history records, it is the dry rot of armies.”<sup>46</sup>

### *V. Constraints in the Muse*

In an ideal world, historians working within the military or other government agencies, would face employers that fully agree with the scholarly procedure just described. In reality, the picture is rather different. Outright censorship is by no means unknown.<sup>47</sup> And even when the military evaluates past experiences with a view to distilling “lessons learned” which are to be introduced in the training program of units, this process is not so open-minded

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46 LIDDELL HART, *cit.*, p. 27.

47 To cite a recent example from the United States: in the fall of 2010 the Pentagon ordered the destruction of some 9500 copies of *Operation Dark Heart*, a memoir written by a retired intelligence officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Anthony SHAFFER, because the book was considered a threat to national security. In the second edition, entire sections were made unintelligible.

<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/8026220/Pentagon-destroyed-10000-copies-of-army-officers-book.html>> (accessed 3 January 2011).

as it may seem. First of all, military organizations are bureaucratic organizations and as such they are slow, not to say reluctant, to adapt to changing circumstances. Like all bureaucracies they suffer from inertia; the impact of changing circumstances is difficult to predict; and the prospect of change may endanger vested interests, for instance when it involves the structure of the armed forces. Navies often have a preference for battle fleets but such a “blue water” fleet is useless in operations against piracy or insurgents. The natural reaction is to resist policy changes. Likewise, it took until 1932 for the British Army to assess its experience in the First World War, and when it did so this study was done rather haphazardly.<sup>48</sup> As a result, ‘lessons learned’ often simply remain lessons ‘identified’.

Another complicating element is the persistent belief in the existence of immutable principles of war. Military thought assumes that, during military operations, there is an interplay between contingency (e.g., friction) and fixed principles of war. Past experiences are regularly studied in order to show that really nothing has changed.<sup>49</sup> Friction does play an important role in the military’s evaluations, but as an unwelcome intrusion into the principles, rather than as an organic aspect of warfare with which it has to reckon.

But even when military organizations would fully share the view that complete access to files and the right to write as they see fit are preconditions for historians to be able to contribute to the education of ‘thinking soldiers’, there will always be a number of limitations to the topics that military historians working within military organization will be able to address. Four of those limitations come to mind. First, there is a tension between official spokespersons and the academics in the military (or any bureaucratic institution for that matter). Spokespersons are employed to inform the public, to explain a certain course of action, and to limit political damage resulting from it. They are em-

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48 After the Second World War, the Netherlands Royal Navy successfully resisted attempts to be transformed into a coastal navy that focused on counterinsurgency. Instead, it developed plans for worldwide operations and managed to structure its fleet accordingly. Cf. Ger TEITLER, «De staf der Zeemacht. Ervaringen in de Oost, 1902-1949», Ger TEITLER (Ed.), *Tussen vloot en politiek: 100 jaar marinestaf*, Bataafsche Leeuw, Amsterdam, 1986, pp. 51-88. On the British: Williamson MURRAY and Richard SINNREICH, «Introduction» in MURRAY and SINNREICH, cit., pp., 1-11, at 2.

49 Examples are the many studies of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. Modern examples also abound. Cf. BLACK, cit., 23.

ployed by either the ministry of Defense, the armed forces, or both. Historical research may produce unsettling results that potentially impact on the position of the minister. In the Netherlands, a critical study of the Dutch army's performance in 1940 conducted by historians working with the General Staff, led to a court case initiated by infuriated veterans and to questions in parliament. In this situation, the authorities could have chosen to apply strict control over the contents of future historical studies in order to limit political damage. Instead, the then minister of Defense formally guaranteed academic freedom in the military.<sup>50</sup> The tension between scholars and spokespersons, however, is partly dependent on the character of the minister in office – if he feels insecure, there is likely to be more involvement on the part of spokespersons. Generally, Dutch military historians have attempted to avoid this by refraining from research of events that occurred under the current government. This is also methodologically motivated: such research would seem to be premature.

Secondly, even when military organizations are sympathetic toward the Rankean ideal, historians working for the military will be either civil servants or professional soldiers. This means that they have had to swear an oath of allegiance, in most cases to the constitution. The oath obligates one not to disclose secrets, among other things. However, what constitutes a secret is not for the historians to decide. Abysmal failure is often a cause for censorship. One does not need to list the countries or cases here, and the repercussions for historians may range from having to serve a prison term to thinly-veiled threats that funding for education and research-related trips might have to be withdrawn. The actual limiting effects of the oath depend on the political system and situation of a particular country. There will be situations when the oath (or the hierarchical system) will function as a brake on what military historians write and teach even if it is methodologically sound and well-researched.

It is equally possible that in both cases (that is, political sensitivity and disclosure of secrets) the tension may be alleviated by some sort of negotiation: historians working for the military may study all the relevant documents,

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<sup>50</sup> Letter def0000166 Minister of Defense F. de Grave to the Second Chamber, Acts of the Estates General 2001-2002, 23 October 2001. The verdict of the court can be accessed at <[http://www.concernedhistorians.org/content\\_files/file/1e/133.pdf](http://www.concernedhistorians.org/content_files/file/1e/133.pdf)>.

but not refer to them directly, and they have to submit their publication for approval. This, however, might very well prompt the question to what extent such publications may still be considered academic, since any debate on them will be hampered by the fact that access to the sources is restricted to historians working for the military.

A third limitation is that of the security of ongoing operations. Security is a legitimate concern, and historians working for the military would generally accept this. But authorities may invoke the argument of security at will, and military employed historians are hardly in a position to successfully challenge them. Apart from security reasons, there are also methodological considerations. Although the argument that “camouflaged history is the dry rot of armies” is, of course, also valid for ongoing operations, military-employed historians generally refrain from publicly commenting on these. However, they would be willing to tell students at military academies or command and staff courses what they think. This is a regular practice, found also in civilian education, as is the case with the venerated Chatham House Rule.<sup>51</sup>

The last limitation is somewhat different from the others, and may also be found in civilian universities. It is the limitation flowing from the need to be ‘relevant’, which may slowly erode academic freedom in the military. Of course, researchers working with the military will have to address subjects which are relevant to the institution. But how to establish military relevance? Studies on postconflict justice and post-war reconstruction, for example, are utterly relevant since, in one way or another, post-conflict justice and post-war reconstruction are what most Western-style armed forces are involved in nowadays. With many other topics, however, this is less clear. The latent (and at times open) tension is aggravated by the fact that bureaucratic organizations are inclined to respond to actual needs and they demand quick answers. More often than not, solving ‘field problems’ in the ongoing operation is the only concern for the military, and even for their long-term planners. For researchers working for the military, however, this may pose a problem since re-

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51 The Chatham House Rule amounts to a tacit agreement between speaker and audience that the speaker will share sensitive information with the audience on the condition that this information will not be referred to directly in public, and that the identity of the source will be not be disclosed.

search programs are financed on the basis of 'relevance'. This means that they are expected to focus on such field problems. However, proper (historical) research of these field problems usually takes such considerable energy that upon its completion another field problem requiring a 'relevant' solution may have arisen. The criterion of relevance is also problematic since it assumes that the outcome of a given research project can be known beforehand. Often it has been unexpected outcomes that have proven most relevant.<sup>52</sup>

The four types of tension outlined here cannot be solved, at least not permanently. What can be done, however, is to alleviate them. Potentially, the most effective way is to tap into the military's interest in learning. We can be sure, nevertheless, that whatever there is to learn from the past, suffers from the impediments described above.

## *VI. Exercising the Right to the Truth*

In democratically organized societies based on the rule of law, negotiating academic freedom for historians who are in the service of governmental military organizations is a complicated issue and the outcome of the negotiation process is greatly influenced by the culture of the specific military organization. If it is a rather open organization whose leadership truly believes in accountability, historians as a rule will work under rather favorable conditions, and they will be tempted to try and increase their leeway. They will have to persuade the official spokespersons and their head of department that no political risk is involved in their work, or get them to turn a blind eye. If the military organization is inwardlooking, focused on secrecy and tradition, and if it sees itself as the guardian not only of national security but also of national

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<sup>52</sup> Unintentional discoveries include penicillin, radioactivity, phosphorus, and atmospheric pressure. On these, see Ola OLSSON, «Why Does Technology Advance in Cycles?», *Journal of Economic Growth*, 10 (2005), pp. 31-53; Donald W. McROBBIE, Elisabeth A. MOORE and Martin J. GRAVES, *MRI from Picture to Proton*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 2, and Herbert ELLERN, *Military and Civilian Pyrotechnics*, Chemical Publishing Company, New York, 1968, p. 33. In military history, research on the causes of the German victory over France in 1940 produced unexpected findings. Karl-Heinz FRIESER, *Blitzkrieg-Legende*, Oldenbourg Verlag, Munich, 1995.



pride and identity, the leeway for historians is likely to remain limited. It will be even more limited for historians working in countries with an authoritarian civilian or military political system. There may, however, exist certain instruments that historians could use to bolster their case.

One of these is the exercise of the nascent right to the truth, or as it was formerly called: the right to know. Another is the adoption of a code of professional ethics. The right to the truth was developed in reaction to large-scale violations of human rights, with a view to offer some kind of redress of past wrongs. In many cases, of course, such wrongs cannot be undone, but its advocates hold that knowledge of what happened offers consolation to victims' families and may help to prevent a recurrence of these violations. The right to the truth is nonderogatory and inprescriptible. All human beings may lay claim to it and states are expected to provide information, redress wrongs, and preserve material relating to their past and present actions.<sup>53</sup>

For historians there are two sides to this right. Like other human beings, they have the right to ask questions and be given information, but they also bear responsibilities; as professionals trained to study the past, they have the duty to report truthfully.<sup>54</sup> In my view, this is all the more so with professional historians working for the state, such as military historians, since logically they would be the ones called up to fulfill the duties of the state arising from the right to the truth. Such tasks involve the publication of sources and the writing of history. All this should happen in a truthful, impartial manner, reflecting what actually happened. Theoretically speaking, this duty to report would thus provide the historians in government service with an excellent opportunity to enhance their position vis-à-vis the state organs.

There are, however, a few complications that impact on the utility of this right for historians in government service. Their position is weakened by the fact that there are different types of military history on offer. Military historians do not monopolize the past, and the military may very well choose

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53 Cf. Antoon DE BAETS, *Responsible History*, Berghahn, New York and Oxford, 2009, pp. 154, 160-161. Diane ORENTLICHER, «Settling Accounts: The Duty To Prosecute Human Rights Violations of a Prior Regime», *Yale Law Journal*, 100 (1991), pp. 2537-2615, at 2606-2612.

54 DE BAETS, *Responsible History*, pp. 163-165.

the histories they like. Secondly, the right to the truth may be universal, in-prescriptible and non-derogatory, but it has to be implemented by states. In countries with a monistic legal system, that is, in countries where obligations under international law directly impact on the domestic scene, the right may be invoked by anyone. It is somewhat more complicated in states that have a dualistic system. In dualistic legal systems, international obligations do not directly impact on the domestic scene. For this to happen, parliament is to pass a separate law that outlines the obligations and lists the exceptions. There are states with dualistic systems that quite liberally grant access to researchers, the best known examples are the United States and the United Kingdom.

In both legal systems, laws and treaties prevent truly unimpeded access. It is conceivable that historians may successfully invoke the right to the truth to open up archives and get access to sources, but I do not see how historians in government service may successfully appeal to it by themselves and convince their employer to allow them more breathing space. As civil servants or active soldiers, they are bound by their oath. They may appeal to statutes and the like, but an appeal to a human right designed to redress and prevent gross violations of human rights seems somewhat out of place, all the more so since the applicability of the right to the truth is to be decided in court. If it comes to that, the historian usually has already left government service even when such governments publicly profess a willingness to account for past actions.

Lastly, in countries with authoritarian rule it is unlikely that governments whose armed forces participated in large-scale violations, would be willing to fulfill the duties arising from the right to know.<sup>55</sup> In such states it will be very difficult for historians in government service to use the right to know successfully and increase their leeway. It would take considerable bravery on the part of domestic activists, much patience and sustained international pressure to enforce this, but historians in state service are unlikely to take the lead. It should also not be forgotten that military historians in authoritarian

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<sup>55</sup> Consider only the painfully slow process of domestic adjudication of war-related crimes in the former Yugoslavia, or the transition from communism in East Central Europe; see the European regional report in M. Chérif BASSIOUNI (Ed.), *The Pursuit of International Criminal Justice. A World Study on Conflicts, Victimization, and Post-Conflict Justice*, 2 volumes, Intersentia, Antwerp and New York, 2010, vol. 2, pp. 803-1004.

countries are sometimes part of the repressive system. This is not to say that the right to the truth does not apply, but by and large such historians would see themselves as the guardians of tradition and national greatness. Such an outlook will make it difficult for them to question the official story, let alone publicly oppose it in their writing or teaching.<sup>56</sup>

The right to know is a stronger instrument than a code of professional ethics, and it may be that historians in government service underestimate its potential, but the limitations I mentioned are real. Does that mean that codes of ethics, as the lesser instrument, are of no use at all? On balance, I think not. Claiming the right to the truth – however justified – may backfire in its appeal to high principles. Politicians and military authorities may shrink back from its implications and block anything like it. By contrast, it could well be argued that codes of ethics may produce and guarantee the desired breathing space. This may even be the case when there also is a legal or political guarantee.

The reason for this is that codes of ethics set professional standards that every historian ought to uphold. Their added value is in the fact that historians can present military organizations with an explicit formulation of the academic foundations of their profession and scholarship. Since these codes include obligations, such as the obligation to faithfully represent their findings, and the obligation to carry out sound heuristics<sup>57</sup>, military organizations, which also live by professional codes, can understand the standards historians have to uphold. Cynics might remark that military organizations could not care less, since they are not interested in what ‘ivory tower academics’ think of them. But military organizations (and bureaucracies in general) do care for their public image – in fact, they do so much more than they care for the truth. It would be over-optimistic to assume that organizations that operate in a democratic framework are interested in undiluted accountability. There

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56 It was only with the advent of perestroika that an attempt was made to write about the Soviet Union’s World War Two experience in a truthful manner. Richard J. OVERY, *Russia’s war*, TV books, New York, 1997.

57 On such codes for instance DE BAETS, *Responsible History*, cit.; see also Antoon DE BAETS, «Argumenten voor en tegen een ethische code voor historici», and «Ethische codes als kompassen: een nawoord» in *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 118 (2005), pp. 564-571 and 581-582 respectively; A. DE BAETS, «The Swiss Historical Society’s code of ethics: a view from abroad», *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte/Revue suisse d’histoire/Rivista storica svizzera*, 55 (2005), pp. 451-462.

is a certain willingness to account for past actions, but in general it is more important to them not to lose face. If the quality of the output of scholars in their service appears to be markedly less than the academic standards, this may be a cause for (some) concern and as such may provide historians with some breathing and negotiating space.

Moreover, a code of ethics may be of service to both historians and their employer: it could offer a litmus test of quality, and act as a moral compass in the negotiation process between military historians and the military. It provides the bandwidth for these negotiations, and may carry home the idea that historical reality itself is non-negotiable. This could be expressed by a direct reference to the right to the truth. A code that contains the understanding that historical reality is non-negotiable may lead to an acceptance of operational history as the preferred way to study past military exploits, which in turn would further enhance the position of military historians vis-à-vis their employer. Nonetheless, military historians will never be the equals of the military or the government. As civil servants or members of the military hierarchy, military historians may question the judgment of their employer, and try to increase their leeway. But in the end all comes down to the willingness of this employer to learn, or to account for its acts.

## *VII. Conclusion*

Some fifty years ago, eminent military historian Michael Howard summarized the relevance of military history to the military professions as follows: it was to make “both professions wiser forever”.<sup>58</sup> His remark went against the military and academic grain since he was speaking at a moment when the relevance of the past seemed very much in doubt. Its magisterial potential had been questioned and most military history writing was below academic standards. Since then, however, much has changed. In military circles the relevance of the past is now debated rather than denied as had been the case for much of the twentieth century.

The return, so to speak, of military history did not restore it to its previous

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58 HOWARD, *Lessons*, p. 8.

standing within the military. At least in part this is because military historiography has changed as well. As outlined in the preceding pages, at present there are a number of more or less coexisting types of military history, with different levels of methodological sophistication. While this may in part account for the modest standing of military history in civilian universities, it also poses a problem for the student of military history if only because the military employs four types of military history at the same time. The methodologically most advanced, operational history, is but one of these. It is advanced because unlike the other types it pays due attention to epistemological and methodological problems. Although its potential to establish and clarify what actually happened must be considered greater than the other types, operational history to a certain extent undermines its own impact as a result, because its students are far less inclined to draw clear-cut lessons or to predict. Since the military is primarily interested in the past for its magisterial potential, history that questions this potential is *prima facie* less useful.

However, from the 1990s onward, with the advent of the complex 3D operations, the way in which many military organizations perceive military history writing has changed. The concept of the “thinking soldier” has inspired a reappraisal of military history. The magisterial potential is no longer sought in what to think, but in how to think.

Nevertheless, military historians face legal, institutional, political and security related limitations that impact on the way they work. These limitations occur everywhere, albeit in different shapes and with different impact. In accountability-minded organizations, military historians are in a much better position than their colleagues in an inward-looking organization. The irony is, of course, that by placing limitations on their historians, military organizations may very well erode the magisterial potential of the past they are hoping to tap into. There is nothing to learn from intentionally distorted accounts. Only full access to the sources (documentary and living), and freedom to discuss them, and to write and disseminate their findings will enable military historians to complete sound research.

At the same time, it is clear that such an ideal situation will rarely materialize. The actual leeway historians will acquire is dependent on the outcome of a negotiation process. In this process, historians may profit more from the

codes of ethics that several of their colleagues in civilian institutions have adopted, than from the newly established right to the truth. This right may be of some help, since it entails several duties that the state is to perform, but it is unlikely that historians within the military may appeal to it successfully. Their colleagues outside of it may have a better chance. In any case, this will be a long process since it requires a change of (institutional) culture. By contrast, a code of ethics may go a long way to produce the required effects because it establishes clear academic standards that should be upheld. Failure to achieve those standards will diminish the standing of the military, and may contribute to battlefield failure. In the end, although this non-armed struggle may be hard and long-drawn, it is one that must be fought. It is the only way to make both professions wiser forever.

Author's details:

*Floribert Baudet (1971) holds a PhD in history from Utrecht University (2001) and has worked at the Netherlands Defence Academy since 2006. He is Associate Professor of Strategy and has, among other things, published on Dutch military history and foreign relations, on Intelligence, on the former Yugoslavia and on historical methodology. He can be reached at [FH.Baudet@mindef.nl](mailto:FH.Baudet@mindef.nl)*



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