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MILITARE
RIVISTA INTERDISCIPLINARE DELLA SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI STORIA MILITARE

SUPPLEMENTO
2020

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Nuova Antologia Militare

Rivista interdisciplinare della Società Italiana di Storia Militare
Periodico telematico open-access annuale (www.nam-sism.org)
Registrazione del Tribunale Ordinario di Roma n. 06 del 30 Gennaio 2020



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Grafica: Nadir Media Srl - Via Giuseppe Veronese, 22 - 00146 Roma
info@nadirmedia.it

Gruppo Editoriale Tab Srl - Lungotevere degli Anguillara, 11 - 00153 Roma
www.tabedizioni.it

ISSN: 2704-9795

ISBN Supplemento 2020: 978-88-9295-024-5

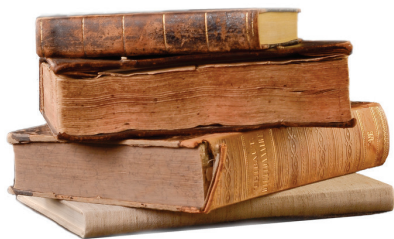
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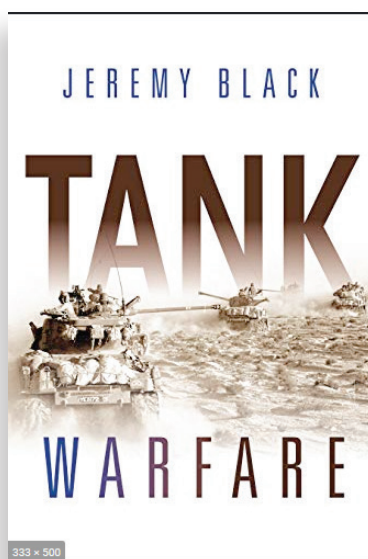


Dan Smith, Knowledge Wins, poster della American Library Association
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JEREMY BLACK,

Tank Warfare

Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2020, pp. 272



One of the books Jeremy Black published in 2020, deals with a subject which, in the military world, is very controversial, that of the use of tanks in warfare. The title of the book is “History of tanks”, but the text is far more than a mere chronological account of tank warfare. It is indeed much more. It is a critique to a sort of tank-centric approach of military culture, one that appeared after World War Two and has been in vogue for the whole duration of the Cold War, an approach which derives from a flawed use of military history. The book is also an overview of what tanks are today and, of course, what tanks should be tomorrow.

The role of tanks in modern warfare is something around which officers and scholars have been arguing since at least two decades. That is why the book is all the more interesting: the theme is actual, the debate around it a heated one. Scholars and officers discussing this question offer very different

answers. On one side, some countries are still investing heavily in armor: Russia surprised all the world by letting its wonderful new T-14 Armata parade on Moscow's Red Square during the celebrations of the Victory Day, France and Germany are jointly developing the Main Ground Combat System (MGCS) to replace their Leclerc tank and Leopard Main Battle tank. On the other side, other countries are prioritizing other kind of investments. The US Marine Corps have decided to ditch its tanks to become a smaller, lighter force. Britain is seriously considering scrapping all its armor to invest in other capabilities, such as cyber, space, helicopters – in this country, the debate has been brought to the attention of Britain's public opinion and has received a great deal of press coverage. By analyzing the way tanks have been used in the past, focusing on the reasons why military leaders came to develop a specific doctrine, the author gives the reader the capability to free himself from the pre-conceived ideas about tanks and look at this weapon with a different point of view.

One big main concept very harshly disputed by the author since the very beginning of the book is the so-called "silver bullet approach". A silver bullet is a term which refers to an approach of a military culture which relies too much on a particular weapon whose introduction will supposedly grant to his owner the absolute dominance over the enemy. Military historians are very familiar with this concept since it is a persistent theme in the everlasting debate around the role of technology in warfare. Too many times the absolute faith in technology has led army to catastrophes, or at least to big delusions. The history of failed silver bullets is a long one. French machine guns did not save Napoleon III's army at Sedan. Nor did the railways save the Confederate army, whose dependence on rails was exploited by general Sherman and his fast, nimble army. Supporter of this kind of approach were indeed a few, even though the most famous, the one whom the author criticize the most, is Joh F.C. Fuller, British Army officer, military historian, and strategist, notable as an early theorist of modern armored warfare and author of *Tanks in the Great War* (1920). In his essay Fuller speaks of tanks as a weapon that will "entirely revolutionize the art of war". Fuller focuses only on weapon, not considering, or at least grossly underplaying, the role of the men, the doctrine, the context and, most surprisingly, that of the anti-weapon. He comes to say that weapons were the key element, indeed "99 per cent" in victory. At the end of the book,

however, thanks to Black's account, the reader is able, if not to give a clear judgement about this debate, at least to understand the different positions held by the most important contributor, thus not falling into Fuller's trap, which is a clear example of a silver bullet approach.

Following Black's argument, tank's role in warfare has been too often misread and overexaggerated. He states it clearly at the very start of the book: *"As this book will show, armor indeed was important, but as part of a more general mix of weaponry. Furthermore, their effectiveness was set in contexts of their use, and, notably, of doctrinal and command factors. Over all came the relationship between this use and the tasking derived from the strategy of individual conflicts. Tanks were used not in the abstract, but, throughout, in specific locations and against particular opponents"*. Tanks were indeed a great innovation and an essential element in the battlefield. But it was not he who owned the most powerful fleet of tanks who won the wars of the 20th century. Rather, it was he who did know how to use them depending on the numerous factors who influence the conduct of the battle, and even more than that. This thin wire follows the path of the story until the end.

The debate about the importance of the use of tanks saw the light after World War One. During World War One tanks were used, indeed, but were far from decisive. Their main advantage was mobility. By overcoming one of the main problem of offensives against trenches, that of the separation of firepower from advancing troops, they could give the troops the ability to sustain breakthroughs. However, limitations were too numerous. Above all: low durability, low speed, lack of firepower, unreliability, difficulty in communication inside and outside it, low flexibility. Additionally, the value of tanks in the First World War was affected by the difficulty of providing sufficient numbers of them. The ability to devise anti-tank tactics was also significant. Black concludes that, even though they could offer great advantage to the conduct of the battle, tanks didn't prove decisive. The main problem were the huge number of limitations: *"Assuming that, in order to produce the huge numbers required, the tank could have been mass-produced, which had not been the case hitherto, nevertheless the same basic problems of unreliability, slow speed, vulnerability to anti-tank measures and guns, under-gunning, poor inter-communication capabilities, and poor obstacle-crossing capability, would all have remained."*

Author like Liddel Hart, Guderian and, above all, Fuller, were the main contributor to the debate who raged in the military world, most notably in Europe, after the war. It focused on the conflicts who took place during the interwar period, above all in Spain, rather than on the experience of World War One.

The main event around which this misreading took place is, evidently, World War Two. Black does give lot of space to this event and to its interpretation. His opinion is that too much focus was given on the French campaign of 1940, which saw large use of tanks. These were very much used by both the Germans and the French, albeit in a very different way. Even though tanks proved decisive in the campaign, the author argues that *“the explanation of German success in 1939-1941 in terms of the use of armor represented a limited and flawed interpretation”*. Tanks, again, were not a silver bullet. Rather than the actual technological capabilities of the weapon, it was the brilliant tactics and operational control and coordination showed by the Germans, who thus enjoyed great mobility, combined with the French errors and limited understanding of mechanized warfare, which proved decisive in the campaign. Black goes on: *“the effectiveness of the blitzkrieg was exaggerated... by the sheer shock of the German offensives. Commentators have overrated the impact on war of military methods which, in practice, represented more of an improvisation than the fruition of a coherent doctrine. Blitzkrieg never existed as a unified concept”*. It was not the deficiencies in weapon, then, which caused the collapse of the French army in six days in May 1940, but the French strategic and operational inadequacies. They ensured that interwar German efforts at innovation produced a *“striking and temporarily asymmetrical operational revolution”*.

The author analyzes the main front of the war, mainly the eastern front, where tanks played a very important role, the African front, with a specific focus on the battle of El Alamein, and the invasion of Germany from the west by the Allied and from the east by the Soviets. In the eastern front, the Germans, thanks to their experience in France and Poland and the great unpreparedness of the Soviets, initially scored great results. There, however, the Germans, were soon affected by wear and tear among their tank, as well as by growing logistical problems. The practice of defending in-depth, very much used by the Soviets, a linear defense being impractical, confused the Germans, whose

strategy emphasized surprise, speed and dynamic force at the chosen point of contact. This strategy proved decisive in absorbing German initial shock. Weather and logistical difficulties, mainly fuel resupply, also caused serious problem to the German armor. The Soviets rapidly recovered from their losses and, at the end of the war, showed high operational skill able to counteract German tactical proficiency. In Africa the effectiveness of the armor greatly depended on the supply of fuel and the integration with infantry and artillery, as well as with integration with anti-tank guns. The British initially failed to grasp the concept of combined arms combat, but soon recovered, and making an effective use of artillery, air superiority and support, gained the upper hand over Rommel's forces. Finally, during the Allies advance to the German frontier, in 1944, showed the Allied conducting a chaotic and improvised campaign, "*in which Allied generals failed to display the necessary co-operation, were affected by supply difficulties, notably the absence of adequate port facilities, the damage to the rail system, and a lack of sufficient trucks*".

Black says that "*the course of the war amply demonstrated the value of doctrine and training in the use of tanks*". Once again, it was not the weapon, be it a German Tiger or an American Sherman, upon which victory depended. Rather, it was a series of factors, mainly the way the weapon was used in the context, the doctrine which ruled its action, the industrial capability to sustain the ratio of production, which made the big difference. After World War Two, the tank had become not only an essential element of an army – the war saw indeed a major spread of the use of tanks, including with powers that had not hitherto done so in combat -, but a symbol of power and prestige for a country. The dominance of the tanks after World War Two is unquestionable. The war gave birth to a sort of industry, centered on character such as Rommel, an industry which comprised books and films, above all, focused on armor. Black's view is that the dominance of the tanks following World War Two was due to the fact that armor was very linked to the generals who played a major role in the war, notably Guderian, Patton and Rommel. Subsequently, thanks to the works of authors like Liddell Hart and Guderian, the Wehrmacht attracted far too much attention. "*The Wehrmacht's emphasis on the attack as a way both to win victory and to counter Allied numerical superiority proved attractive to many commentators and fed through into the focus on tanks. This affected writing about the war, and particularly so at the popular level.*

Thus, for 1943, disproportionate attention was devoted to German offensives, especially at Kursk and the Kasserine Pass, and far too much attention as expended in discussing the Tiger and Panther, rather than focusing on the overall failure of German armor in 1943-45”.

Black follows on analyzing the big trends in tank development during the Cold war. The dominance of tanks in the popular mind did not decline after 1945, the prospect of a Soviet invasion of Western Europe being real. The Soviet invasion should have been conducted with a great number of tanks. The terrain, the North European Plain appeared favorable to the dislocation and the maneuver of armor. Emphasis on tanks was thus encouraged on both sides: both Nato and Russia continued to provide a major role for the army. Tank development, at least initially, was focused on upgunning and uparmoring. Great developments were made in anti-tank weaponry, which at the end of the war had already reached amazing results.

During the Cold war military decision-makers were fortunate to be able to see a lot of conflicts, fought with various degree of intensity, to prove the effectiveness of the armor after the major conflict ended in 1945. Black divides the period in two phases: the first goes from 1945 to 1967, which marks the outbreak of the Six Days War, while the second covers the period from 1968 until 1990, which marks, of course, the end of the Cold War.

In the first period, the author focuses on the Korean War, the first war to which the US committed substantial forces – which saw a little use of tanks, since the terrain were not good at all -, and the Arabo-Israel war. The latter, even more than the Second World War, proclaimed a triumph for armor. Photos of tanks appeared everywhere in the magazines and on tv. Liddel Hart, one of the main promoter of blitzkrieg and tank warfare, stated that the Israeli were following precisely his precept, that of the indirect approach conducted mainly with armor, and thus assured, once again, the cultural imperative of tanks. Black says that *“rather than noting the key significance of taking the initiative in sequential warmaking. Liddell Hart argued that the Israelis were following his precepts and also drew a line from himself via Guderian and blitzkrieg to Israeli success”.*

Focus of the second part of the Cold War are Vietnam, the Yom Kippur war, the Afghanistan war and the Iran-Iraq war. While in Afghanistan and Vietnam

tanks played a little role, much can be said about the other two conflicts. Very important lessons were drawn from the conflict broken out in 1973, when Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack against Israel. The war contributed very much to show the world once again that overreliance on tanks in the force structure can lead to serious defeats and that anti-tank weapons were becoming more and more lethal. Even though Israel showed grave flaws in the use of its armor, upon which it relied too much, the quality of the force, especially in command, made the difference.

The 1990 marks the end of an era. The Gulf war is the last big conventional war. The armies become smaller, the conscription fading away. The main form of warfare is now counterinsurgency. It imposes a complete new culture, a culture in which tanks don't play a large role anymore, or at least so should be. Black says that *"as a result of a mistaken strategy including a strategic culture in which tanks played too large a role, the Americans proved far less prepared for the "wars among the people"¹ that became more significant in the 1990s and far more of a problem for them in the 2000s"*.

Tanks played a big role in Gulf War One. Their effectiveness was greatly enhanced by what is called "network-centric warfare". The coordination of satellites, aircraft and tanks gave the latter an extraordinary target acquisition capability. Tanks could successfully employ precise positioning devices now. In this warfare, tanks were seen as key platforms indeed. However, Gulf War One showed that tanks had to cope with increased lethality of anti-tank weaponry, mainly laser guided missiles and aircraft, as well as rocket propelled grenades. Some US general, however, failed to read the war in the right way. Some of them came to mythologize it. The war showed the world the power of the US army in a conventional fight with another military. Great-power and non-state competitors sought thus to identify and exploit US vulnerabilities with asymmetric responses. The hubris which the US military prowess led to reinforced in their culture a sort of neglect for irregular warfare and stability operation.

The 2003 war in Iraq gave some important insights over the increasing role of tanks in urban warfare. The urban operations conducted in the city of

1 Smith, the art of warfare in the modern age.

Fallujah, above all, indicated the fortress-like value of tanks. Tanks proved useful and powerful in this kind of warfare, but they needed support. Without and effective support of infantry as well as of the close air support that provided a vertical envelopment, tanks were vulnerable.

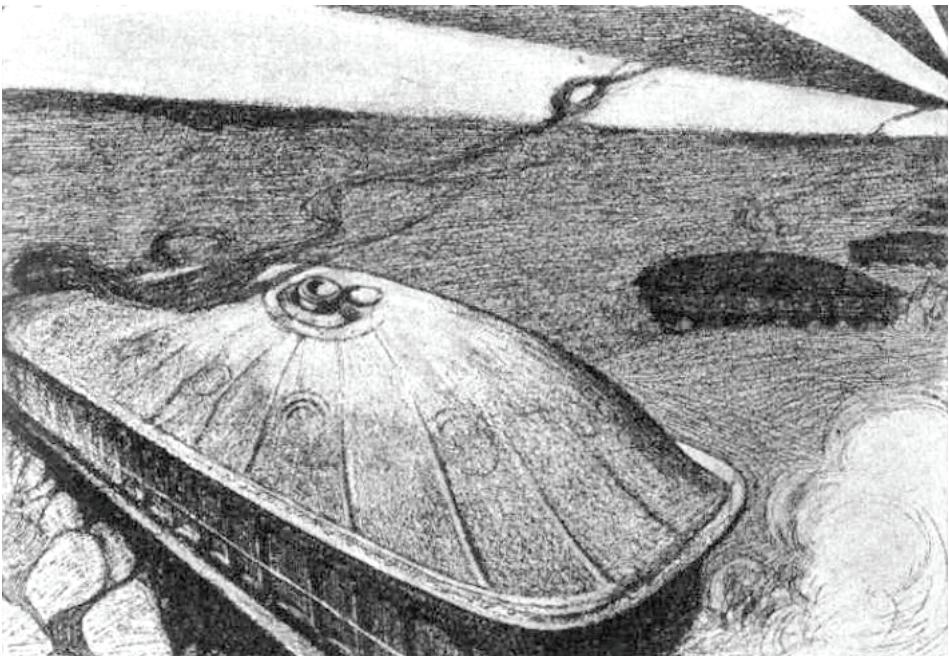
The conflict of the late 1990s have led the military of the most modern countries to focus on the creation of suitable expeditionary forces able to be deployed rapidly in whatsoever part of the world. The focus on expeditionary warfare, rather than on fixed deployments, emphasized nimbleness, speed and multi-purpose flexibility, all within a context of lower expenditure. Preference was thus for lighter vehicles that could be used to equip light infantry units. Every modern military has today at least one light wheeled vehicle, be it a troop carrier, a gun carrier or a multi-purpose vehicle. The most famous example is the US Stryker. Main requisites for vehicles were now, alongside with protection and mobility, deployability, reliability and supportability. Tanks and heavy artillery were becoming less significant.

Along with these new requisites, though, great emphasis was given to protection in mobility, rather than on firepower, the life of a soldier being today of much more worth than ever. The conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan led the militaries to improve armor of their vehicles in order to deal with the challenges of rocket-propelled grenades and, above all, improved explosive devices (IEDs). A completely new range of vehicles, the so called Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles (AMRAP) were rapidly developed.

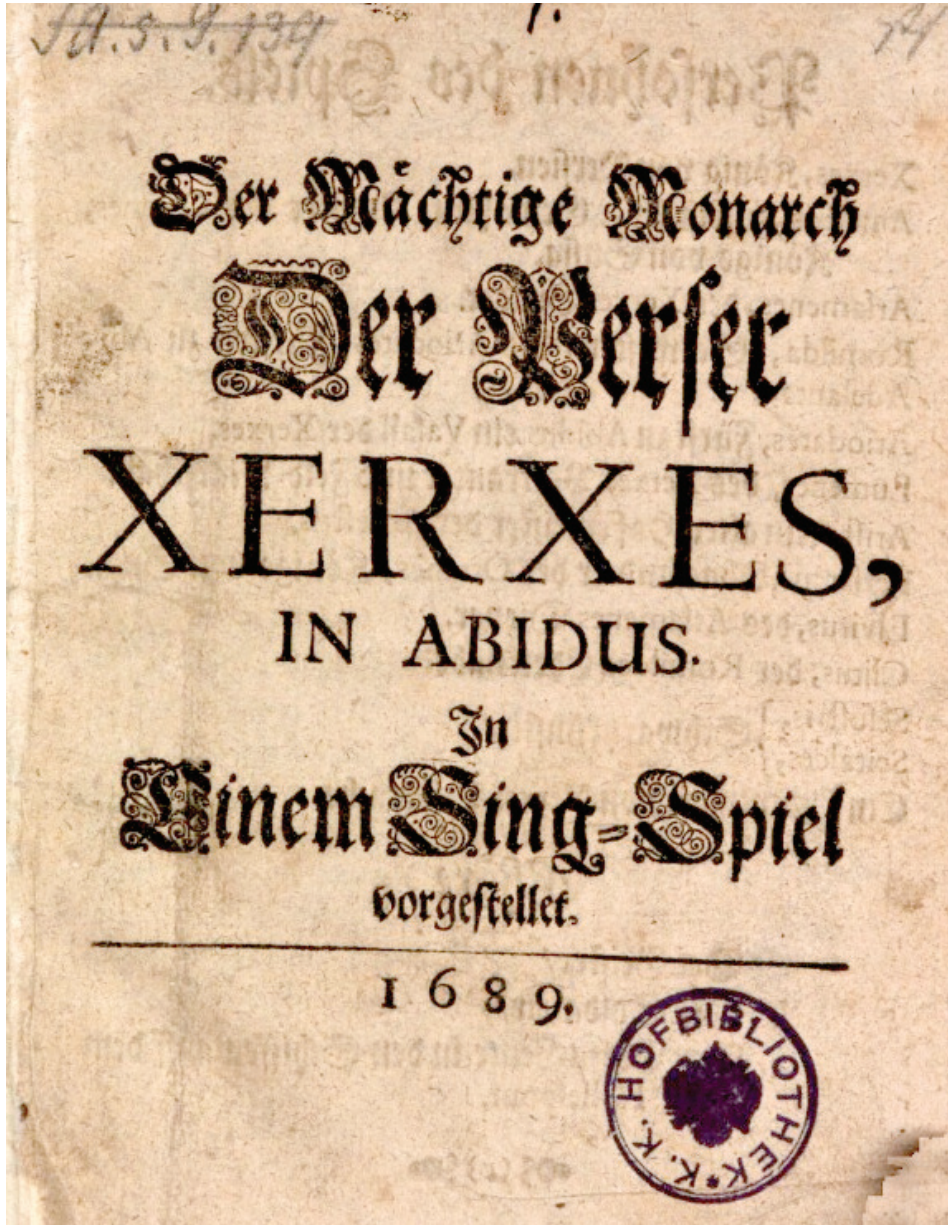
The place of tank in modern conflict has declined. These weapons have become very complex, harder to employ, and their cost have greatly increased. Tanks fleet all over the world have become more lethal and more sophisticated, but indeed smaller than ever. This trend, the rising cost-per-unit, raises questions of obsolescence. It seems to me that the problem raised by Black, that of the cost, should lead every country to reconsider its armor considering the balance between ambitions and resources. It is indeed true to say that he who wants to have everything but does not have the resources to do so will likely fail. Not every country with a medium-sized economy can have today the resources to possess a large fleet of modern tanks in its ranks. Among the most modern militaries of the world, Britain is the only country which has launched a serious debate about the possible scrap of the entire tank fleet of the army.

The decline of tank in warfare does not stem only from the question of the cost. It can be seen both in procurement and in doctrine as well. Tanks are facing, and will likely face, the increased focus of society on cities and the particular military environment this creates. Urban warfare is a special one: it brings together conventional combat with asymmetrical operations. That is not to say tanks are obsolete. Black concludes that “*Although the demise of the tank has been predicted since it was invented, technical responses, if not solutions, to the continuing problems of firepower, mobility and armor suggest that the tank is here to stay, at least until there is a major change in the parameters of land conflict*”.

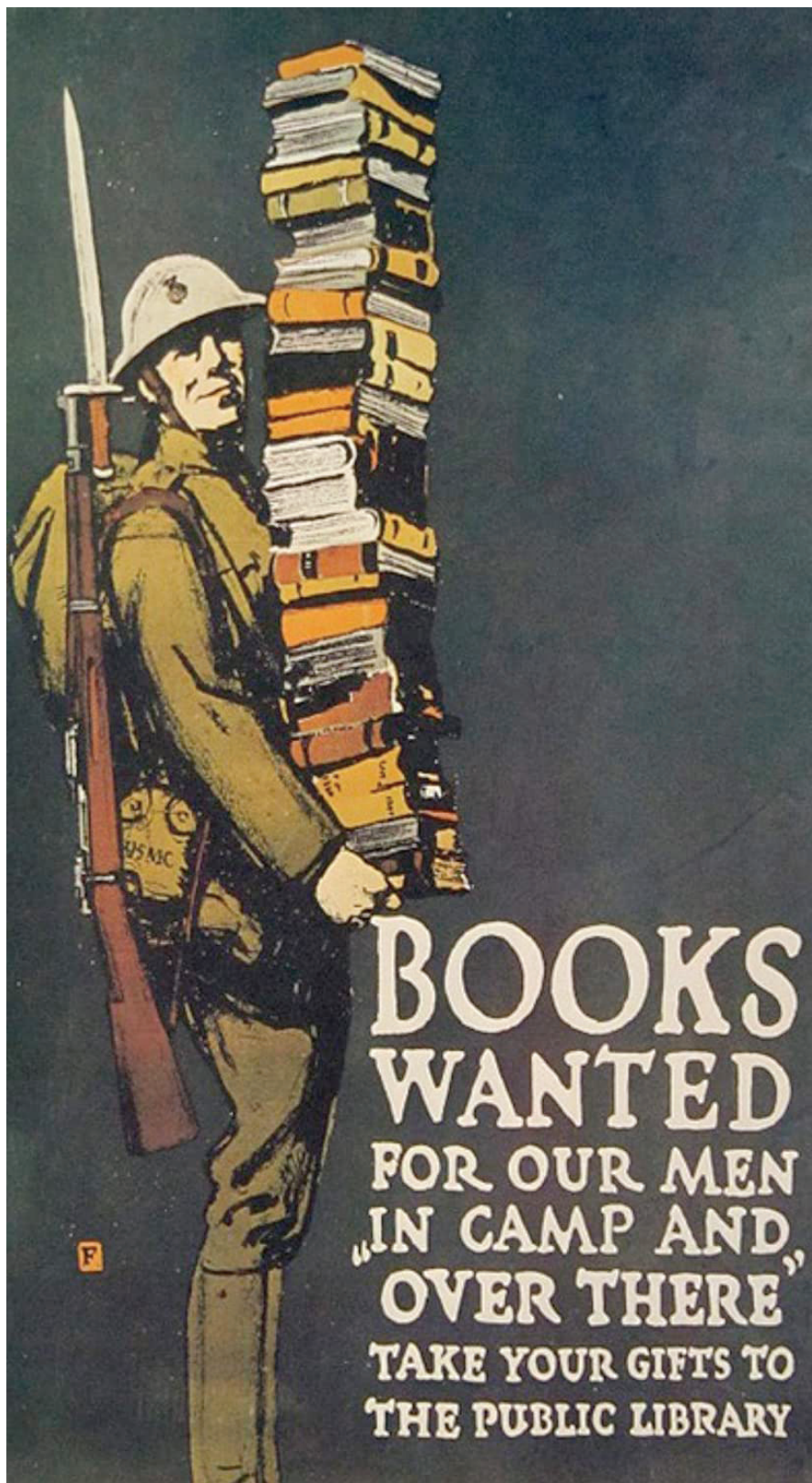
MATTEO MAZZIOTTI DI CELSO



Herbert G. Wells, *Land Ironclads*, 1904 (wikimedia commons)



Frontispizio dell' operetta *Xerxes in Abidus* di Christian Heinrich Postel, musica di Johann Philipp Förtsch, Hamburg, 1689. [Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Europeana, non-commercial use only].



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