



“New” Military History

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Abstract

This chapter provides an overview of the development of “New military history,” a general term for the broadening – in subject, approaches and methods – of the traditional, narrow operational military historiography. It first deals with the influence of the social, cultural, gender, and global “turns” in general historiography on military historiography. Next, the benefits and possibilities of these new perspectives in military historiography are analyzed, followed by the risks and potential dangers. Finally, the question of what the core of military history should be is discussed and an attempt is made to describe a “comprehensive approach” to analyze military action taken in the past, with a multifaceted “plan of attack” with several possible “axes of attack.” “New” military historians who use a comprehensive approach are best placed to explain how the course of military action has influenced the general course of history and thereby can make a full-fledged contribution to general historiography. This unique quality also gives them the ability and the right to participate in or even initiate broader academic debates.

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Introduction

For over 60 years, “new military history” has been a frequently used name for a very varied school of thought in military historiography. The paradox between the name and the length of time that it has been in existence renders its use rather awkward now. Moreover, since the term’s introduction, there has never been any consensus on what it actually means (Paret 1991, p.10; Bourke 2006, p.258). At the time, the “new” referred in general to a broadening of narrow, traditional operational military historiography. New perspectives, methods, and areas of study – initially borrowed mainly from the social sciences – emerged, all of them under the umbrella of new military history. This element of modernizing and broadening – incidentally, a development in the practice of history in general – has been a constant in academic military historiography ever since.

Emergence and Development

The 1960s was a period of tremendous growth for social sciences. This growth was linked to the wave of social criticism that engulfed the world and the influx of students from increasingly larger parts of the population who critically questioned the functioning of state and society. Although military history remained suspect in academic circles (see Introduction), new approaches laid the foundation for a cautious acceptance. Social scientists in particular shifted the focus from the study of military action itself and the drawing of operational and tactical lessons from that study to the impact of wars on society and vice versa. War and society became a distinct subdiscipline. It was only in the 1980s, however, that this subdiscipline really gained momentum. The first journals in the field, such as the *War & Society* journal managed by the University of New South Wales, were published during that time. The acclaimed *Fontana History of European War and Society*, a five-volume series under the editorship of Geoffrey Best, who also wrote the first volume, was likewise published in the 1980s (Best 1982). Another important journal in this regard was *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* (since 2000 *Militärgeschichtliches Zeitschrift*), published by the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt (since 2013 Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr). A tremendous number of subjects were placed and studied under the war and society umbrella. These subjects ranged from the social origins of soldiers to the development of their social status, from the army as the “school of the nation” to the relationship between the political and military leadership, and from the armed forces

as a bureaucratic, professional, or "learning" organization to the armed forces as an instrument for the social disciplining of conscripts from all layers of society. In this context, (the debate on) the concept of "total war" should also be mentioned (Chickering and Förster 1997–2005).

Besides the relationship between society and the armed forces, the experiences of individual soldiers in circumstances of war became an area of study. Instead of being mere pawns in a political game of chess and numbers in battles led by "great" generals, these individuals were now the main actors. The biggest breakthrough in this genre was the publication of John Keegan's *The Face of Battle* in 1976 (Keegan 1976). Using personal documents, Keegan managed to bring the frequently miserable existences of soldiers at the battles of Agincourt (1415), Waterloo (1815), and the Somme (1916) to life. Moreover, by studying combat from this new perspective, he debunked a few generally accepted assumptions about tactics. Readers of this book never again viewed war as a clash with heroic aspects. Keegan showed that it was mainly individual self-respect and group cohesion rather than discipline and courage that kept soldiers going. He also showed that war is above all chaotic and brutal. This image of the hard reality of war was confirmed by another striking work, namely an analysis of the literary processing of the raw experiences in the trenches of the First World War by cultural and literary historian Paul Fussell, which had been published a year earlier (Fussell 1975).

The "social turn" in military historiography, as the approaches described above are often referred to, was the most noticeable change. At the same time, however, financial and economic as well as logistical aspects of warfare received greater attention. A fine example in this regard is a work by John Brewer. In this work, the author convincingly shows that England's/Great Britain's rise to world power status in the eighteenth century was based above all on the state's ability to tax the wealth of its people in order to wage wars (Brewer 1988). The country had been preceded in this respect by the Dutch Republic. Unique forms of public-private partnerships had made it possible for the small, highly decentralized republic to maintain both a strong fleet and a large army in the seventeenth century (Van Nimwegen 2010; Groen et al. 2019). The tenor of this approach was that while leadership and execution were of tremendous importance in land battles, sea battles, and sieges, they could only be understood in their financial and economic and organizational contexts.

The broadening of the field subsequently continued with new turns. One of the most important is the "cultural turn," which came into vogue in the 1990s. The main idea behind this approach was that the way in which states and groups wage war is largely determined by culture (Keegan 1993, p.12). A groundbreaking but controversial study is *The Western Way of War* by Victor Davis Hanson (Hanson 1989; also Hanson 2001). Hanson concluded that the classical Greek way of fighting with infantry in phalanx formations arose from an implicit agreement between the Greek city-states that eye-to-eye combat between units in close order was the way that conflicts should be decided. In Hanson's view, the Greeks thereby laid the foundation for a "Western way of war" characterized by direct confrontations between disciplined units and supported by politico-military systems based on citizenship.

Hanson's thesis was echoed by Keegan, among others, but others described her as too rigid. John Lynn, for example, in his important cultural-military study *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture*, accuses him of replacing one general notion – that of “an all-encompassing soldier” – with the other – that of “a universal and eternal Western soldier.” The influence of culture on armed forces and their actions is, according to him, much more complex and differs per location and time. He makes a distinction between social, military, and strategic cultural influences (Lynn 2003). The field of (military) strategic cultures – how wars were fought – partly overlaps the study of the evolution of military (theoretical) thinking – how wars should be thought –, with Azar Gat as one of the most authoritative authors (Gat 2001).

Another, rather arbitrary example of how culturally determined military action can be is provided by John Dower in his study of the Pacific War (1942–1945). According to Dower, this war was as terrible as it was because both sides interpreted it as being a race war (Dower 1986). A general note in this connection is that what at first glance may sometimes appear to us as being irrational was not necessarily so if one takes account of the religious precepts and cultural conventions of the period in question. Interest in the cultural dimension of military action, also of the past, increased drastically following the end of the Cold War, when Western armed forces increasingly operated in environments that were completely different from their home environment.

Other turns in general historiography that resulted in new questions in military historiography were the “gender turn” and the “global turn.” The gender turn focuses on how culturally determined and socially constructed gender definitions, roles, and restrictions in a society affected the organization and conduct of its armed forces. For example, John Lynn refers to an “aristocratic masculinity” in the France of Louis XIV that required officers to achieve as much *gloire* as possible by exhibiting great personal courage in combat in a way that was visible to everyone present. They were therefore prepared to pay for their positions and spend considerable amounts of money on the creation and maintenance of their companies and regiments (Lynn 1997). The studies that focus on gender and analyses oriented toward cultural influences are indebted to cultural anthropology, with its emphasis on, among other things, the meaning of symbols and rites of passage.

The global turn in military historiography is a relatively recent one. It is mainly the result of rapid globalization. World history degree programs, which emerged in the last two decades of the twentieth century on the back of criticism of narrow Eurocentric and national approaches, are now “booming business” at universities. While the military dimension often occupies a very modest place in these programs, a few military historians are advocating a global, comparative perspective with respect to their field as well. The best known is Jeremy Black in *Rethinking Military History* (Black 2004). His argument is in keeping with an urgent need that armed forces have had since the end of the Cold War. Military units are deployed all over the world against adversaries who often have entirely different standards, strategies and tactics. As a result, there are currently heated debates about the content of key concepts such as “war” (not only by military personnel using military means but also by, for example, non-military actors using cyber capabilities; not only by states but

also by various non-state actors) (Kaldor 2012), "victory" (not only defeating a military enemy but also achieving positive results like good governance, rule of law, and other such results; "success" is therefore a better term) (Landmeter 2018a), and "threat" (the term "risks" tends to be used now). A "global approach" to military history makes it possible to put a given actor's military action into greater perspective.

If we consider that more turns are emerging in military historiography, such as the "emotional" and the "environmental" turns, and that the "linguistic" and "commemorative" turns are also often included in this context (but have been allocated a separate chapter here), it is, on the whole, not surprising that the term new military history can only be described in very general terms and it therefore, also because of the term's age, does not as yet mean very much in itself. With old-fashioned, limited "drum and trumpet" historiography as the reference point, it encompasses the ongoing broadening of the subject, the approaches, and the methods of military historiography.

Gains and Possibilities

The various "new" perspectives in military historiography have tremendously enhanced our understanding of military action in the past and present. By asking new questions, we have gained greater insight into the how, the why, the whereby, and the effects of this action. We have established links between the societies, politics, cultures, and economies of countries and the avenues open to them to wage war. We have become more aware of the stimuli and social and psychological motives of individual soldiers to do in military conflicts that which they would absolutely not be allowed to do as civilians in peacetime, namely use force and kill fellow human beings (Bourke 1999). We understand more fully that the "Western" way of warfare, based on tight discipline and technological advantage and often conducted for the purpose of destroying the adversary, was and is also very much a product of a particular culture and time.

Because of the adoption of much broader perspectives with respect to military action, military historiography has moved somewhat closer to general historiography. An important impetus in this regard was the publication of Geoffrey Parker's book *The Military Revolution* in 1988, that built on ideas that had been introduced by Michael Roberts in the middle of the 1950s (Parker 1988; Roberts 1955). According to Parker, the introduction of the cannon at the end of the fifteenth century initiated a development that would have tremendous consequences in terms of the international balance of power. The cannon were much too powerful for medieval fortifications. In response and in a relatively short time, Italian engineers designed an entirely new, geometric fortification concept with earthen walls that was able to withstand cannonades. This *trace italienne* was rapidly imitated elsewhere in Europe. After the balance between offence and defense had thus been restored, a race started to ensure that one or the other would again predominate. This resulted in an increase in the number of cannon and an improvement in their firepower and range, which in turn

required the strengthening of fortifications. The development required increasingly larger armies, which in turn required better organization. In general, this was made possible by increasing the state apparatus. Moreover, Parker established a link between this political and military strengthening of states and the expansion of European power in the world. “In short, cannon stimulated a military revolution that gave birth not just to the modern state but to European hegemony in the world” (Morillo 2006, p.74). Parker therefore entered the field of the emerging discipline of world history, which in William McNeill already had a leader who attached great importance to the effect of military technology on patterns in global history (McNeill 1982).

In fact, Parker’s contribution anticipated the “guns and germs” debate that flared up 10 years later between expansion historians and “new” military historians about the European expansion of power in the early modern period. The debate was triggered by the claims of evolutionary biologist Jared Diamond in his comprehensive best seller. He saw a connection between geographic location and the climate of Eurasia and North Africa and their greater power and more advanced technologies, as a result of which their civilizations were able to dominate those located elsewhere in the world (Diamond 1997; Raudzens 2003). Military historians also participated in the debate about the causes of European imperialism in the nineteenth century. This debate was given tremendous impetus by the publication in 1981 of *The Tools of Empire* by Daniel Headrick, who emphasized the crucial role of modern technology in this imperial expansion. In addition to the will to dominate, advanced firearm technology was one of the most important causes of European success (Headrick 1981). In line with this issue is that of the colonial state as “a state of violence” in which the threat or actual use of military force was the principal instrument of control. The problem concerning the frequently major role of soldiers in former colonies following independence must also be mentioned in this regard (Schulte Nordholt 2002). The complex relationship between “colony, empire and genocide” is likewise a challenging area (Moses 2008; Zimmerer 2019). Military historians can contribute to the study of these issues. They are already doing so with verve in the debate – they themselves dominate – about the colonial roots of current counterinsurgency doctrines (Porch 2011; French 2011; Luttkhuis and Moses 2014). For their part, naval historians stress the relevance of their subfield – which, although also military, is usually studied completely separately – by referring to the contributions that they can make to the European expansion debate and many other academic discussions, such as the debate about the link between maritime power, political liberty, and economic prosperity (Harding 2016, p.76).

The analysis carried out by Parker and others of the link between military developments and the rise of the modern state was, among other things, in line with the development of the fruitful concept of the “fiscal-military state,” which focuses on the question as to how a state was able to generate more financial resources for its armed forces and for waging war by collecting more taxes (in exchange for more participation) (Brewer 1988; see also: Tilly 1992, ‘t Hart 1993, Glete 2002, Storrs 2009). There are various other relationships between the functioning of the armed forces and that of the state that “new” military historians

focus on or can focus on. Examples in this regard include the use of military successes in the creation and cultivation of national identities, such as was done particularly in the nineteenth century (e.g., Buschmann and Langewiesche 2003; Leonhard 2008). Military historians should not engage in such creation and cultivation. Rather, through broad research, they must decipher myths and place the actions of "great" generals and admirals in a balanced perspective. The role of the armed forces in maintaining or toppling the political order is also an interesting area of research. Virtually every country has had periods in its history in which its armed forces were more involved in domestic power struggles than in taking action against foreign adversaries. This issue partly overlaps with that concerning the sensitive relationship, certainly in liberal democracies, between the political establishment and the armed forces. Another approach that has aspects in common with military history is the link between domestic social tensions and military action taken abroad to mitigate these tensions, a link analyzed for the German Empire by Hans-Ulrich Wehler as early as 1973 (Wehler 1973). The same is true regarding research into links between politicians, the military leadership, and the business community, particularly the arms industry (the military-industrial complex).

Academic fields of study to which "new" military history can contribute and from which it can benefit include international relations (in the knowledge that the instrument of military force can have a different function within the various schools of thought and approaches), international law (for instance the interrelatedness of changes in warfare and the emergence and development of just war theory), war studies (the interplay between images of the enemy and the way in which military action is taken), political science (apart from the problem regarding political-military relations already referred to, one could consider the interaction between military action and public opinion), and conflict studies (the analysis of alliances, practices and discourses with which organizations and groups engage in violent conflict) (Demmers 2020). Within the field of history, there are possibilities with respect to, for instance, labor history (soldier's life as a special kind of labor) (e.g., Tilly and Tilly 1998, pp. 199–229; Zürcher 2013), the history of technology (cross-pollination in terms of civil and military technological development), and cultural history (e.g., applying the concepts, which relate primarily to political culture, of transfer and *histoire croisée* – the exchange or intertwining of ideas, customs, and institutions between countries or transnational groups – can, despite the limitations of the first concept in particular, also be fruitful in the military field) (Espagne and Werner 1987; Werner and Zimmermann 2006).

Risks

Despite the many positive aspects associated with the broadening of the "area of operations" of "new" military history, a few objections must be noted. As a few scholars have already pointed out, in addition to being sensitive to academic fashions, "modernising" drives can also end up functioning as a straitjacket into which one must fit to secure recognition and funding for research (Paret 1991, p. 17).

They even referred in this context to a smug “New Intolerance” and “the new holy trinity plus one: race, class, and gender in the workplace” (Lynn 1997, pp.780–781).

The methodologies used have also been criticized. This criticism is in keeping with the general criticism expressed by historians that social scientists are too eager to draw general conclusions from the study of only a few events or one aspect. For example, Bourke draws attention to the risk that some cultural approaches can result in cultural reductionism; that is, anything that cannot be explained is simply classified as being “culturally determined” (Bourke 2006, p. 274). Morillo points out the danger of technological determinism in the military revolution debate, including the one about the “revolution in military affairs” (RMA) that has been going on since the 1980s (Morillo 2006, p.79; Harding 2016, p.113). Moreover, it has been argued that a greater closeness to the social sciences would carry the risk of “Geschichte ohne den Menschen zu schreiben” (writing history without people) (Echternkamp 2010, p.13).

More fundamental are the objections that “new” military history has in many cases only served other disciplines and subdisciplines and, even more importantly, that the field of study has become too fragmented. It shares the second objection referred to with war studies, about which the following question has been asked: “What unifies this field of inquiry other than use of the word ‘war’ [...]?” (Barkawi 2011, p.130).

This brings us to the most fundamental objection regarding the wave of “new” theoretical, conceptual, and methodological approaches, often borrowed from other disciplines, namely that the field of study has become too far removed from its core object. The argument in this context is that the “war and society” approach tends “to take the actual conduct of war out of military history” (Morillo 2006, p.41; Showalter 2000, p.121; Black 2004, p.54). It focuses much more on the impact of war than on war itself and “most often stress[es] the military as a social institution and neglect[s] or even [denies] its combat essence” (Lynn 1997, p.784), or, as Bourke put it, “new military history sometimes threatens to reduce the complexity of armed conflict to mere crises of masculinity or tropes in the literary imagination” (Bourke 2006, p.260).

Most military historians would agree with Michael Howard: “At the centre of the history of war there must lie the study of military history – that is, the study of the central activity of the armed forces, that is, *fighting*” (Howard 2006). Keegan used similar words in *The Face of Battle*: “Military history [...] must in the last resort be about battle” (Keegan 1976, p.29; Gardiner 1988, p.6). At the same time, no self-respecting, academically trained military historian approaches a particular battle or campaign as something that occurred in a historical vacuum. He or she would agree with the words of Bernd Wegner: “Nur als integrierter Bestandteil einer Gesamtgeschichte des Krieges hätte eine moderne Operationsgeschichte ihre Daseinsberechtigung” (Only as an integral part of the overall history of war would a modern history of operations have its *raison d’être*) (Wegner 2000, p.113). Stig Förster provides a somewhat broader description, one that also relates to peacetime, that “new” military historians will be able to endorse: “Krieg als zentrales Thema der Militärgeschichte darf keinesfalls als Verengung auf die Geschichte der Kriege

misverstanden werden. Krieg ist vielmehr der unterschwellige Fixpunkt auch bei der Beschäftigung mit der Problematik von Militär und Gesellschaft im Frieden" (War as a central theme of military history must by no means be misunderstood as a limitation with respect to the history of wars. Rather, war is the subliminal fixed point even when dealing with the problems of the military and society in peacetime) (Förster 2000, p.266) In this case, "war" can also be read as "military action" in general.

The Way Ahead

If military history wishes to be and remain a full-fledged subdiscipline of history, it must have a clear focus and make a recognizable contribution to general historiography. This means that it must have its own field of research that few would dispute. This has consequences in terms of the subtopics selected for research, the methods used, and the interaction with other disciplines. Possibilities regarding theory building will also have to be explored. The great variety of approaches under the new military history umbrella already provides many points of reference.

The central subject of military history is military action. As indicated above, virtually all scholars engaged in the subdiscipline agree on this point. Military history research must be linked directly or indirectly to the actual deployment of military personnel or the possibility of actual deployment, preparations for deployment and direct effects in this context. While operational history constitutes the core, the context is just as important. It is about using a "comprehensive approach" to understand the military action concerned, or the threat of such action, and the success or failure of the action or threat thereof. Besides, in the words of Geoffrey Best, "Battles and how to fight them, Campaigns and how to conduct them, and the ways armed forces gear themselves up for these special tasks" (Gardiner 1988, p.12) – including factors like military organization, command and control, doctrines, tactical and operational planning, logistics, the quality and quantity of weapons and equipment, and the soldiers' training and conduct on the battlefield – it is about the international and national circumstances and the decisions that led to the deployment, the economic, financial, and organizational basis that made the deployment and its continuation possible, as well as the support for the deployment among the populace.

A comprehensive approach to military action taken in the past requires a multifaceted "plan of attack" with several possible "axes of attack." First, there is the historical axis of attack, which seeks to place the action in the chronological line of prior history-causes-trigger(s)-action-effects-consequences. Along this axis, the explanation of the military action is sought mainly in the historical context. The second option involves approaching the matter from the levels of military action; that is, the political strategic, military strategic, operational, tactical and technical levels, all of which are in an ends-means relationship with each other. Along this axis, outcomes of military deployment are mainly explained by referring to success or failure at one or more of these levels. A third possibility with respect to better

understanding military action is to consider it from five different levels, namely the individual level, the group level, the armed forces level or, as the case may be, armed forces sublevel (e.g., was there interservice rivalry?), the national level, and the international level (state and non-state actors). This is because what one observes depends on the position, or level, from which one is observing (Singer 1961). These three axes provide ample scope for the development of analytical perspectives and the use of concepts from other disciplines and subdisciplines, from biological, psychological, and sociological insights to explain the behavior of individual soldiers to the capitalist economic order to explain the belligerent behavior of states. Moreover, they provide scope for irrational behavior and misperceptions as explanatory factors and for concepts such as “coincidence,” “chance,” and “friction.” While it may not preclude risk altogether, a multidimensional comprehensive approach reduces the risk of deterministic explanations that are excessively finalistic or based on a single factor.

A fourth approach that can be used to secure an intellectual grasp of military intervention and the functioning of armed forces in earlier times is Carl von Clausewitz’s “paradoxical trinity.” The three tendencies that he distinguishes with respect to armed conflict (“primordial violence, hatred and enmity,” “chance and probability,” and “instrument of policy”) and that he linked in the context of his time to, respectively, “the people,” “the commander and his army” and “the government” (Clausewitz (1976), p.89), have, if we interpret the three elements broadly and, for example, read “the government” as “warring community” (Landmeter 2018b), an almost universal explanatory power (Strachan 2013). But even if the specific trinity of state (the government), armed forces and society is adhered to, the concept still raises relevant questions, for instance about public support for “wars of choice” (as opposed to “wars of necessity”). Did these contribute to the well-being and security of the people in accordance with the task of the state in the “social contract” that the state has with the people? In this military deployment, could the armed forces count on the public’s full support? Were these wars worth risking the lives of the state’s soldiers? This question had a major direct and indirect effect on the way in which military action was taken.

A fifth and sixth axis of attack can be distinguished. To really understand military action, the paths referred to above must also be walked in relation to the adversary (ies) and ally(ies). What factors made them act the way that they did? Furthermore, what perceptions existed about each other’s intentions and capabilities? Parties always acted in relation to each other. For this reason, only a comprehensive approach that takes all parties into account can provide genuine insight into the course of military action. Finally, a comparative approach can place the action in a broader synchronic or diachronic perspective and thereby say something about the degree of generality and uniqueness as well as the degree of continuity and discontinuity of this action.

A comprehensive approach to military action as described above does not deal with philosophical questions such as whether and why human beings tend toward evil. It is also not primarily intended for the formation of general theories about causes of wars. Furthermore, its purpose is not to provide ready-made “lessons” for

future action in the manner that was common in the past, and indeed remains common in many cases, at military academies. Nevertheless, like all good academic historiography that focuses above all on people's actions, the approach can help with respect to future action in the sense that it can broaden the horizon and increase the capacity to reflect of those who are open to the approach.

Conclusion

Although the purely military dimension of wars and conflicts is viewed in academic circles with less disdain than it was a few decades ago, it is by no means the case that this dimension is accorded its proper historical value. Even today, very few professional historians take the broad path of military history. This is a pity, because "new" military historians who use a comprehensive approach are best placed to explain how the course of military action has influenced the general course of history and thereby can make a full-fledged contribution to general historiography. This unique quality also gives them the ability and the right to participate in or even initiate broader academic debates.

Summary

"New military history" is a general term for the broadening – in subject, approaches and methods – of the traditional, narrow operational military historiography. The various "new" perspectives in military historiography – inspired by several "turns" in general historiography – have tremendously enhanced our understanding of military action in the past and present. The most fundamental objection regarding the wave of "new" theoretical, conceptual, and methodological approaches, often borrowed from other disciplines, is that the field of study has become too far removed from its core object, military action. The best way to analyze military action taken in the past is a "comprehensive approach," with a multifaceted "plan of attack" with several possible "axes of attack." "New" military historians who use a comprehensive approach are best placed to explain how the course of military action has influenced the general course of history and thereby can make a full-fledged contribution to general historiography. This unique quality also gives them the ability and the right to participate in or even initiate broader academic debates.

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