Military History and the Study of Operational Art

By MILAN VEGO

Wage war offensively, like Alexander [the Great], *Hannibal, Caesar, Gustav Adolphus, Turenne, Prince Eugene and Frederick* [the Great]*; read and re-read the history of their campaigns; model yourself on them; it is the only way to become a Great Captain and to master the secrets of the art.*

—Napoleon I

One of the key prerequisites for applying operational art is full knowledge and understanding of its theory, and theory cannot be properly developed without mastery of military history. The great military commanders were, almost without exception, avid readers of history. Because the opportunities to acquire direct experience in combat are few for any commander, the only sources of such knowledge and understanding are indirect, and military history is the most important source of such experience.

The Problem

The education of operational commanders should start early in their careers. The U.S. Service academies and colleges can and should provide a solid foundation of military history. However, far more important is self-education of the future operational commanders through the study of both general and military history throughout their professional careers. In general, inattention to the history of warfare is perhaps the greatest weakness in the education of U.S. officers. History is largely treated as a marginal embellishment instead of a core of military education.[1] One of the major problems in teaching operational art is generally poor to almost nonexistent knowledge of wars conducted in the modern era, not to say of those conducted in the ancient and medieval eras. This cannot help but have highly negative consequences on the ability of future flag officers and their staffs to exercise their duties in times of war and peace.

Too many officers have an aversion to military history, a problem made worse over the past 20 years by several factors. Not only the leading proponents of information technologies but also their many uncritical followers firmly believe that military history cannot provide any valuable lesson for today or the

Wallace Collection, London

Napoleon and His Staff **(1868), by Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier**

National Archives (Print by A.H. Ritchie)

Staatsbibliothek, Berlin

Above: George Washington entering New York, 1783

Right: *Major-General Carl von Clausewitz*, by Karl Wilhelm Wach

future. Despite all the experiences of previous generations, military history is considered essentially irrelevant in the information era. Historical examples are sometimes willfully distorted and even intentionally falsified to prove preconceived notions on the importance of advanced technologies in the conduct of war.

What Is Military History?

All too often, history is considered the exclusive preserve of professional historians. Yet it is inherently broader, deeper, and more diverse than the study of any other area of human activity.[2] It encompasses every aspect of the experience of humanity,[3] and it tends to broaden the vision and deepen the insights of its readers. Events are seen as part of a much broader framework filled out with complex and dynamic interrelationships of social forces, individuals, location, and timing.[4] B.H. Liddell Hart, for instance, wrote that history is:

the record of man's steps and slips; it shows us that the steps were slow and slight; the slips, quick and abounding. It provides us with the opportunity to profit by the stumbles and tumbles of our forerunners. An awareness of limitations should make us chary of condemning those who made mistakes, but we condemn ourselves if we fail to recognize mistakes.

History serves as a foundation of education because it shows how mankind repeats its errors and what those errors are. French historian Marc Léopold Benjamin Bloch (1886–1944) observed that history is, in its essence, the science of change. History teaches that it is impossible ever to find two events that are exactly alike because the conditions from which events spring are never identical.[5]

The true purpose of history is to describe the truth. However, a pure truth is never unalloyed. History can only provide objective truth as closely as possible.[6] It can only show us the right direction but cannot provide details in regard to how we should reach a final destination. It can also show us *what* to avoid, but it cannot tell us *how* to avoid. At the same time, history can highlight the most common mistakes that mankind is apt to make and to repeat. It teaches its students how to learn by the experience of others.[7]

History is a highly vigorous and intellectual discipline. Through the process of explanation and its use in the time dimension, history examines the development of human institutions and attitudes. Political, economic, and social ideas do not emerge from a vacuum. They are given meaning only by the circumstances within which they occur. They also do not spring from sources of eternal truth; they are conceived in the minds of humans who contribute to and are affected by specific events.[8] History gives its readers a consciousness of particular circumstances in human affairs. It teaches them to be wary of broad generalizations and quick solutions.[9]

Military history is a part of general history. No matter one's attitude toward war, it is an integral part of the human history. There has never been a century without a war, and never has there been a peace that lasted 100 years.[10] But after the end of World War II, the world entered an era of almost continuous low-intensity conflicts, while there were only a few high-intensity conventional wars. The 3,500 years of military history is the only academic study that provides the totality of the phenomena of war.[11] A study of past wars is fundamental to preparation for the next war, for current military problems cannot be solved without an understanding of the past from which they stem.[12]

Military history must be more than a logical, factual, and frank record or account of events. Above all it must be accurate. Carl von Clausewitz aptly observed that military history has value when it "always presents the truth, the entire truth, and nothing but the truth."[13] However, people in general are unwilling to admit the truth if it disturbs their comfortable assurances. The most dangerous of all delusions are those that arise from the adulteration of history in the imagined interests of national and military morale.[14] Historical accounts that glorify victories and gloss over or omit failures are worthless to students who are seeking to improve their ability as leaders in war. Hence, to be of any value, history must give all the facts, pleasant and unpleasant, about the campaigns at hand.[15]

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Sharpshooter's fate at Gettysburg, July 1863

War Department (Alexander Gardner)

Dr. Milan Vego is Professor of Operations in the Joint Military Operations Department at the Naval War College.

The greatest danger for the proper application of historical knowledge is propagandistic and censored history. Such histories are more commonly written in totalitarian or authoritarian societies. However, such distorted views of events are unfortunately often written in democracies. Propaganda as history will rouse defeated nations to new activity. Victors, on the other hand, like to exaggerate the extent and importance of their successes. The main purpose of a propagandistic history is to make everything appear in the most favorable light. Such a history might be politically necessary, but it is also dangerous.[16] In fact, such a history is not history at all. Among other things, it cannot provide sound lessons or serve as the basis of intellectual and professional education. It fosters one of the worst evils in professional military thinking—self-deception.[17] Perhaps one of the worst examples of propagandistic military history was the Soviet history of the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) written during Stalin's era and even well into the late 1980s. All of the writers paid the greatest tribute to the Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, a leader who never made a mistake. The Red Army performed superbly and without fail. But even after the end of Stalin's era, the Soviet history of World War II remained heavily propagandistic in tone and content. Hence, even if some events were truthfully presented, it was difficult to distinguish fact from fiction.

War of the Nations (New York Times Co., 1919)

German submarine captured by Allied forces, World War I

The Importance of Military History

The basis of military education is to provide mental development for future commanders. Its practical value is the training and mental development of soldiers. The benefits of studying military history depend on how closely it approaches the definition and method of studying it.[18] Among other things, its study provides a commander with a core of background knowledge and understanding that allows him to form and reform his vision of the battlefield beyond the realm of his combat experiences.[19] Planning games and wargames, field trips, and exercises are excellent tools for improving the quality of operational and tactical training. However, only the study of military history can provide insights into all aspects of warfare.[20]

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Prussian General Johann David von Scharnhorst (1755–1813) firmly believed in the value of military history for creating a new type of highly educated officer.[21] Napoleon I (1769–1821) observed that on the battlefield, what one believed to be a happy inspiration proved to be merely a recollection.[22] Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, Sr. (1800–1891) was an avid reader of history.[23] He reportedly used his knowledge of past military events in preparing plans for his campaigns.[24] However, British field marshal Sir Archibald Wavell (1883–1950) held a different view. He believed that study of psychology and leadership are of greater importance to a military man than the study of operations. Wavell asserted that the military successes of Napoleon I could be attributed to his knowledge of psychology rather than to his study of rules and strategy. Yet Napoleon himself said that the knowledge of the higher art of war is not acquired except by experience and the study of history of wars and the battles of great captains.[25]

A full understanding of the relationship between policymakers and operational commanders can be obtained by studying military and political history. The future operational commander must fully understand the political strategic objective and strategy and policy before he can start to understand various aspects of operational art. That understanding and knowledge can essentially be acquired only through the critical study of past wars and major operations and campaigns.[26]

This critical study of past wars—campaigns and major operations, in particular—is a primary source for developing the operational perspective of future commanders. Warfare does not have its own logic, but it has its own grammar, and the grammatical rules are deduced from studying military history. Because few commanders have experience commanding forces at the operational level, the best way to educate them to think operationally is through the study of the successes and failures of great military leaders.

The study of military history provides a broad perspective on events and gives a sense of proportion in relation to time, place, and circumstances.[27] Methods of accomplishing operational or strategic objectives in the past might be obsolete today, but the fundamentals of strategy or operational art remain essentially the same as they were in the recent or even distant past. A study of history allows us to deduce tenets of operational warfare. The concentration of forces, for instance, affected the outcome of the battle at Leuctra (in Boetia) in 371 BCE, where the Thebans defeated the Spartans, in the same way it did in the German invasion of France in May 1940.[28]

A proper study of military history helps to derive general principles of leadership through a critical reading of the biographies and memoirs of the great captains of the past. It also helps in understanding the reasons for their successes and failures.[29] By studying military history, we can get a sense of the pressure and responsibility of commanders in uncertain situations when critical decisions must be made.[30]

History can be studied to derive lessons that prove or negate the validity of tactical and operational tenets and ways of using one's military sources of power. So understood, it not only contains the study of the past but also can be useful in the future and can provide concrete instruction for action.[31] Moltke, Sr., believed that the concrete historical conditions of a military success or failure must be taken into account in deriving lessons. Lessons learned from a study of military history should not be dismissed because of the inherent limits of one's own experiences. In his view, for practical application, lessons should be deduced from timeless tactical and strategic fundamentals.[32]

Studying Military History

The study of military history should be one of the most important parts of the cur-

riculum in all Service academies and colleges. However, future operational commanders and planners will never fully master this critical subject unless they devote considerable effort to self-education throughout their professional careers. They should be students of history, not historians—a big difference exists between the two. The better educated the commander, the more he understands the bigger picture and the better he will perform his responsibilities (provided that the commander has the essential qualities of character).[33] This implies that study of military history should be methodical and long term. The most recent wars should be studied first because they are most relevant for the current situation and will be for some time.

A serious study of military history must be accompanied by study of the general history of the period and setting under consideration.[34] In studying military history, one should analyze all the events in their entirety; otherwise, events that in fact portend trends for the future might be omitted from analysis. The real danger in studying military history is that a narrow mind will gather the formal aspects of past successes divorced from their proper context. The most obvious reasons for victory are often the most unreliable and worthless guides for future action. As one naval historian aptly observed, "Those who have blindly followed the easy path of thoughtless imitation have often ended in dire disappointment."[35]

Military history should be studied in width, depth, and context. By studying warfare in *width*—that is, over a large timeframe—one can discern and learn the discontinuities.[36] Ideally, the study should focus on the history of the art of war, which will show how and why it has changed from era to era. A study of military history should not be limited to a certain age or area. One of the pitfalls is trying to cover too broad a field. It would seem much better to cover a limited number of events thoroughly than to give students a superficial picture of the greatest possible number of occurrences.[37] Hence, military history should be studied in

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depth. One should read everything available on the subject. This means that not only official histories should be studied but also memoirs, autobiographies, letters, diaries, and even historical fiction. Only in such a way can one hope to learn what really happened.[38] It is more valuable to know a single campaign in great detail than several campaigns superficially.[39]

Operational lessons learned are derived from in-depth study of a large number of major operations or campaigns—or case studies. The best tactical lecture, the best lecture on military theory, or the best doctrinal publication would remain dry, bloodless, and inanimate if it were not illustrated with specific examples from the past. However, military history is not just a collection of examples. It also provides the highest quality of nourishing material for the soul of soldiers.[40] Generally, it is a mistake to see the past in distinct patterns, for it is true that each student reads his own peculiar lesson according to his own peculiar mind and mood.[41] Clausewitz said that if some historical event is being presented in order to demonstrate a general truth, care must be taken that every aspect bearing on the truth at issue is full and circumstantially developed and carefully assembled before the reader's eyes; otherwise, the proof will be weakened, and it will be necessary to use a number of examples to provide the evidence missing in the first event. [42] The larger the number of examples, the more reliable the results and the more likely that sound lessons will be derived. Very often, this method is abused by citing many examples without providing many details. Such an approach can provide a superficially strong proof, but one without much substance. There are some aspects of war for which one may present a dozen examples to support a certain theory and the same number of examples to prove just the opposite. Clausewitz wrote that a single event, thoroughly analyzed, might be much more instructive than one that is superficially treated. He observed that the danger in a superficial treatment lies in the fact that, in most cases, he who writes in such a manner has never mastered the events he cites—therefore, such superficial, irresponsible handling of history leads to hundreds of wrong ideas and bogus theorizing.[43]

The emulation of historical examples has often been used to save time and resources or to win bureaucratic battles in support of a

U.S. Army

U.S. Soldiers march into Germany through the Siegfried Line, 1945

U.S. Navy (Obie Newcomb, Jr.)

Marines storm Tarawa in Gilbert Islands, November 1943

specific solution. More often than not, these so-called lessons entrapped those who tried to apply them without recognizing the changes in conditions that occurred with the passage of time.[44] The greatest disservice to history and its lessons comes from its frequent association with a given set of military principles or doctrine, as Antoine-Henri de Jomini (1779–1869) did in studying 30 campaigns of Frederick the Great (1712–1786) and Napoleon I. He deduced (erroneously) certain fixed maxims and principles that he claimed were both timeless and universal in application.[45]

A latent danger in studying military history is to derive lessons that might have been correct for a given historical era but that have become inappropriate or entirely false for the problems of the day. It is even more serious to continue to rely on such lessons without trying to adjust, refine, or even abandon them in light of the new situation. For example, the writings of Rear Admiral Alfred T. Mahan (1840–1914) are a classic example of lessons that not only were uncritically accepted but also were dogmatically followed long after their utility passed. Mahan was essentially not a theoretician but a historian of seapower. He did not use historical examples to illustrate a theoretical construct; rather, he used naval history to derive lessons that could be universally applied. Mahan's ideas on the superiority of capital ships, decisiveness of major naval battles, and irregular and indecisive nature of commerce destruction were accepted almost without question as the foundations upon which to build navies. At the same time, his strong support for convoying as the most effective method for protection of shipping was virtually ignored.[46]

Another pitfall in studying military history and deriving lessons is in focusing on a single defining moment and then absolutizing its significance at the expense of all others. In studying military history, one should avoid applying a historical example of one era to completely changed contemporary conditions, as Chief of the General Staff Field Marshal Alfred von Schlieffen (1833–1913) did. Despite his great intellect and erudition, he committed fatal errors in interpreting the lessons of military history. Among other things, he became fixated on a single solution to a complex strategic problem: the defeat of France at one fell swoop. Schlieffen considered the example of the envelopment maneuver at Cannae in 216 BCE as the main tenet for transforming one's own strategic inferiority into relative operational superiority at a decisive point.[47] His biggest mistake was to raise experiences from a single decisive battle to a strategic concept. In effect, Schlieffen tried to transfer the experiences of preindustrial wars—the Punic Wars (264–146 BCE), Seven Years' War (1756–1763), and Napoleonic Wars (1805–1815)—to the completely new circumstances of major wars in the industrial era. At the same time, he neglected to draw lessons from the American Civil War (1861–1865) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905).[48]

In studying military history, diverse sources should be used, ranging from official and semiofficial histories, autobiographies, biographies, and social history to reminiscences of simple soldiers. Biographies of great captains are generally more objectively written than autobiographies. The books and articles written by war correspondents and journalists can have a great value for any student of history. Also, historical novels can be quite useful.[49] General George Patton (1885–1945) said that to be a "successful soldier you must know history, read it objectively. Dates and even minute details of tactics are useless. . . . you must also read biography and especially autobiography. If you will do it you will find war is simple." The most useful histories of past wars are those written from an operational perspective. Unfortunately, such histories are sorely neglected, and relatively few have been written. Histories written during the life of the actors or too near their era are generally tinged with prejudice, colored by self-interested flattery, and influenced by the selection and treatment of source material. Histories written too long after the time of participants are often fictional and sentimental.[50]

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Yet for all its proven value, the study of military history should be approached skeptically. Those studying it should be aware that they are studying not necessarily what really happened, but rather what historians say happened. In studying history, there is one's judgment, but there are no formulas, tenets, or rules. Military history cannot and should not provide a precise determination of norms for the future. The contradiction between theory

National Archives

Generals Omar Bradley, Dwight Eisenhower, and George Patton at Bastogne, 1944

and practice can be bridged only when theory is understood as contemplation and not as a lesson.[51] Clausewitz believed that the purpose of studying war was to hone judgment before the battle, not to dictate decisions during it. He was adamant that the study of military theory, and by extension military history, should guide the commander in his self-education, not accompany him to the battlefield.[52] Clausewitz warned against misusing history by expecting to provide a school solution rather than to educate the mind of the military commander to expect the unexpected.[53]

Experience abundantly shows the critical role and importance of comprehensive understanding and knowledge of military history for all officers, and especially for those who aspire to or are selected to take the highest duties in their respective Services. Almost without exception, successful operational commanders have been serious students of history. Because the life of any officer is too short, the opportunities for acquiring operational perspective by commanding large forces in combat are rare indeed. Yet the broad view and solid knowledge and understanding of the art of war must be obtained in peacetime. It is too late to obtain that knowledge once the hostilities start. Moreover, operational perspective is a prerequisite for successful command at the operational level not only in war but also in time of peace. The most important and proven source of that indirect experience is military history. A future operational commander should approach the study of military history systematically and as a lifelong effort; otherwise, the results will be wanting. **JFQ**

NOTES

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