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The State of Military History Studies

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The purpose of this article is to present a brief survey of English literature on military history published during the last decade or so to determine whether there are in that literature any discernible trends and to point out some problem areas where existing lacunae appear particularly glaring and where, in this author's view, useful opportunities for future work accordingly exist.

To achieve these aims, the article is divided into four parts. The first will deal with the state of military history as written for popular, military, and academic consumption respectively. The second will outline some of the new themes that have emerged in this literature. The third will examine the advantages and disadvantages of some new methodologies employed, including in particular quantitative analysis and war-gaming.

Finally, an attempt will be made to draw all these various threads together, and to present an outlook for the future.

To start with the good news, military history is alive and well. As the shelves of newsstands and the book corners of department stores all over the Western world clearly show, wars continue to make rattling good history. Fictional, semi-fictional and even factual accounts of the exploits of past generals are as popular in our times as they were in those of Homer; one need only manufacture an illustrated work about Rommel—such as the one by that title by Charles Douglas Home (London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1973)—in order to start the Great War, a title which it took another and even larger conflict to eradicate.

For reasons that are not far to seek—that World War II was the largest conflict ever fought and that it is likely to remain so in the future—the stranglehold in which this conflict has been keeping military history since 1945 is extraordinary. Rarely if ever

in history has any single subject been so much written about and, since this is the age of the mass media, not merely written about but filmed, televised, modelled and put into the form of war games. Such has been the preoccupation with World War II that, consciously or unconsciously, it has come to be regarded as the model for future conflict, as is demonstrated by that extraordinary best seller, General Sir Hackett's *The Third World War* (London, 1978), which is really nothing but a rehash of 1939–1945 fought with superior but basically similar weapons, compressed into as many weeks as the previous struggle had years, and ending somewhat implausibly in a limited exchange of hydrogen bombs followed by the disintegration of the USSR.

Although excellent studies on World War II have continued to be produced during the last decade—witness David Irving's *Hitler's War* (London, 1976) and John Erickson's two volumes on the Eastern Front—in general their hold has been weakening. As history continues its course and new conflicts break out to make us forget the old, many of the events of World War II which were, at one time believed to be of monumental importance are no longer perceived as such. This is reflected in the publishing world. By the mid-1970s the production of official histories by the leading countries had been completed or else abandoned, except in the Federal Republic of Germany which, for reasons that are only too understandable, was a latecomer in the field. Moreover, as this author found out to his cost,² titles such as "Japan's Invasion of . . .," or "The Campaigns of General von . . .," or "The Battle of 194 . . ." (fill in as desired) were losing their appeal. Increasingly, they are being replaced by other, more general works, em-

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bracing many different aspects of the war besides the purely military one. Basil Liddell Hart's *History of the Second World War* (London, 1970) has had no successors and, indeed, there is no reason why it should have. Instead, we have witnessed the appearance of such works as P. Calvocoressi and G. Wint's *Total War* (London, 1972); A. Milward's *War, Economy and Society 1939-1945* (London, 1977), the title of which speaks for itself; and R. Overy's *The Air War 1939-1945* (London, 1980) which, surprisingly enough, represents the first attempt to cover this very important field in a comprehensive rather than a fragmentary or an anecdotal manner. To put it all into a nutshell, World War II at long last is turning from The War into a war, a development which, in so far as it may help us regain a proper perspective, heralds nothing but good both for those who study past wars and for those who would plan conflicts of the future.

L Nor is World War II the only subject the treatment of which is changing. It used to be that, particularly under the influence of Liddell Hart (the last edition of whose *Strategy*, originally written during the late 1920s, was published in 1967), wars were examined primarily from a strategic, operational and tactical point of view. In study after study, victories were represented as won and defeats as suffered mainly because armies were outflanked or encircled, or because their communications were cut, or because their manner of operation was either too concentrated or dispersed (sometimes, both)—all of which terms constituted a convenient shorthand for understanding. What was often overlooked was the fact that none of these terms and relationships made any sense whatsoever except when seen against the background of numerous other factors; in other words, the operations of war do not exhaust themselves in drawing topological patterns on a map but consist very much of supply, intelligence, and command as well.

To start with supply, logistics may be defined as the science of dealing with everything an armed force needs from the moment it leaves the factory gates (nowadays the

proportion of all supplies that comes from the fields rather than the factories is negligible) to the time it is distributed, or consumed, or expended. Since armies march on their stomachs, the subject is obviously vitally important both to the conduct of war and to its historical interpretation; yet it was long neglected by military historians who apparently did not consider it sufficiently interesting or marketable to merit their attention. One of the first to show the error of this view, and to call attention away from strategy towards logistics, was Larry Addington in his 1971 book, *The Blitzkrieg Era and the German General Staff 1865-1941*, a work which, though as disjointed as the title indicates, did point to the role played by supply and transport in the campaigns that it covered. In 1975, the Historical Office of the Italian General Staff published *I servizi logistici delle unita italiane al fronte russo 1941-43*. This was followed by the present author's *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (London, 1977) which represented an attempt to trace the impact of logistics upon a number of important campaigns during the last two centuries and to draw some general conclusions concerning its development. Since then much—though not nearly enough—work has been done to shed additional light on this side of war: one need only recall Donald Engels' magnificent *Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian Army* (Berkeley, 1978) to realize the vital contribution that a study of logistics can make to the understanding of past wars.

The second topic whose place in the literature has been prominent during the last decade or so is military intelligence in war. Intelligence had long been neglected by serious historians who, with some justification, considered it the domain of mystery writers and other assorted hacks with the result that, since the historians knew nothing about it, they tended to belittle its importance. In this they were aided by the desire of the intelligence services themselves to conceal their activities, a desire that stemmed partly from the nature of their work and partly from a

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desire to enhance its importance still further by enveloping it in a cloak of secrecy.

During the 1970s all this changed. One reason was the sudden outbreak of the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War which left people all around the world wondering how an intelligence service that had been regarded as among the very best could have been fooled in such a way; the other was the publication in 1974 of F. W. Winterbotham's *The Ultra Secret*, in which it was revealed that the British throughout World War II had intercepted, decoded, and read German military wireless traffic. Together, these two events led to an extraordinary outburst of publications which, collectively, tried to answer the question: how important are intelligence activities in modern war, and to what extent did the fact that they had now been brought into the open force a revision in existing interpretations of historical events?

The following are but a few of the main publications that formed part of the debate. David Kahn in *The Code Breakers* (London, 1974) showed that, during World War II, almost everybody had been reading at least some of the messages of almost everybody else at least some of the time. Ronald Lewin in his *Ultra Goes to War* (London, 1978) provided the best short review of how the British decoding operation came about, but remained somewhat puzzled as to why the Allies, with such excellent information at their disposal, nevertheless suffered so many defeats during the early years. Francis H. Hinsley et al. in *British Intelligence in World War II* (New York, 1979, two volumes published so far) proceeded on a much wider basis than did Lewin, showing the way British intelligence was organized, the assumptions on which it rested, and the manner in which it operated. J. Dorwart in *The Office of Naval Intelligence; the Birth of America's First Intelligence Agency 1865-1918* (Annapolis, Md., 1979) and W. J. Holmes in *Double Edged Secrets: U.S. Naval Intelligence Operations in the Pacific During World War II* (Annapolis, Md., 1979) tried to make out that intelligence had been invented by the U.S. Navy. So did the United

States Air Force, ed., *Ultra and the History of the U.S. Strategic Air Force in Europe vs. The German Air Force* (Frederick, Md., 1980), a carefully researched if somewhat slanted piece of official history the real purpose of which is to show that, given good intelligence, the bomber can still get through. R. V. Jones in *Most Secret War* (London, 1978) and A. Price in *Instruments of Darkness* (London, 1979) reviewed some of the technological aspects of intelligence, whereas Charles G. Cruickshank in *Deception in World War II* (London, enlarged edition, 1981) attempted to show the importance of his subject without, however, getting very far beyond what had already been published. All in all, the spate of books on intelligence and intelligence-related activities, which is only now showing some signs of abating, has added considerably to our understanding of the subject as such and has done much to restore its lost respectability. It has not, however, forced any very significant revisions concerning historical events, and indeed there have been several publications devoted to explaining why this has not happened.³

Closely connected with intelligence, but embracing a considerably wider scope, is the entire problem of command, control, and communication (sometimes abbreviated as C³) in war. Traditionally historians have written about the activities of armed forces and about the qualities of commanders; the means through which the latter have been translated into the former have seldom been subjected to systematic examination, however, and indeed from reading the pages of military history one would rarely guess that coordinating the performance of bodies of men numbering hundreds of thousands or even millions presents any problem whatsoever. During the 1970s, the wrong-headedness of this view was forcefully brought up by Edward N. Luttwak in his brilliant study, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* (Baltimore, Md., 1976), whose claim that the empire had a coherent strategy rationally developed by a coherent organization on the basis of carefully assembled

information and staff work has been the subject of an ongoing debate. Unfortunately much of that debate has taken place on the pages of learned journals. Good books on the question of how historical armed forces were commanded, how they did their staff work, and how their various components communicated with each other and coordinated their activities are only now getting into print.

Finally, a very important theme which has dominated much of military-historical writing during part of the 1970s is the question of guerrilla warfare. Spurred on by the U.S. experience in Vietnam—where the most powerful and technologically advanced military machine ever assembled failed to triumph over a small, backward and economically poor people and its armed forces—and also by the outbreak and spread of spectacular acts of international terrorism from 1968 onward, works on the subject flooded the market. Among the best must be mentioned John Ellis' *A Short History of Guerrilla Warfare* (London, 1975); Walter Laqueur's *Guerrilla* (Boston, 1976), which comes complete with a companion volume on terrorism and with another consisting of readings; and Robert Asprey's *War in the Shadows: the Guerrilla in History* (Garden City, N.Y., 1975), the most massive volume on the subject. As in the case of intelligence, however, guerrilla warfare and its companion, terrorism, seem to have lost some of their appeal since 1980. Interest in their history was at its peak during the mid-1970s, but has suffered some decline after the last colonies in Africa and Asia gained their independence and after it became clear that scattered kidnappings, hijackings and assassinations did not, after all, represent quite the threat to the world's continued existence which at first they appeared to do.

The long and the short of it is, military history during the last decade has been greatly enriched by the emergence of a variety of new themes which, for one reason or another, had previously suffered from neglect. Some of these themes, not all of which could be listed here, originated in historians'

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attempts to break existing deadlocks and find new explanations; others were the result of interest in contemporary affairs being projected backwards, sometimes very far back indeed.⁴ Since it is usually the juxtaposing of past and present which makes history in general, and military history in particular, the fascinating subject that it is, it may be safely predicted that, in the near future, problems that are currently being wrestled with by the military will constitute wide open fields for successful and remunerative historical research. Among these problems, apart from C³, are the impact of modern technology upon military organization and performance; the role that women have, can and may play in their country's defense; and the question of morale and the willingness to fight which, in most Western societies, appears to have undergone a remarkable decline.

III

We are living in the age of the computer, and nowhere is the contribution of the number crunchers greater than in the military by and for whom many of the original machines were developed from World War II onward.⁵ Indeed, the use of computers with their extraordinary ability to rapidly process vast quantities of data has led to a revolution in every aspect of military use; without them the armed forces of the present, vastly more complex than those of the past, could hardly exist, much less engage in active operations of war.

Whereas computers are relatively new, attempts at quantitative analyses of war and military affairs are not. Ancient writers on military history, such as Thucydides, Xenophon, Arrian and Polybios, were usually quite careful in giving the strength of the various contingents that made up the armies they describe. Early in the eighteenth century the French military engineer, Sebastien de Pretre de Vauban, attempted to fix precise rules as to how many guns had to fire how much ammunition in order to bring down what kind of fortress in what length of time.⁶

During the middle of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Engels was only one among the many who tried to grasp the impact of new breechloading arms on the tactical attack by calculating what percentage of the men in an assaulting unit would be hit by what number of units at what distance and within what time.⁷ In 1915 the British mathematician F. W. Lanchester succeeded in formulating a small number of simple equations which have been in use ever since and which purported to express the relative power of different armies as well as the rate at which, firing at each other, they would be attrited. While some kind of mathematical instruments for determining range and elevation for artillery have been in use since the time of Nicolas Tartaglia in the sixteenth century, mathematically-based operations research only came into its own during World War II, when it was used to model small-scale engagements between destroyers and submarines or aircraft and anti-aircraft artillery. Even in 1939-1945, however, this work was still being done by experts whose tools, in addition to their own often outstanding heads (some of them, such as P. M. H. Blackett, were subsequently awarded the Nobel Prize), consisted mainly of logarithmic tables and slide rulers, and whose ability to process data was, accordingly, quite limited.

After 1945, all this changed. Increasingly powerful computers gradually made it possible, in principle at any rate, to construct mathematical models of entire armed conflicts and to run and rerun those conflicts through the machines so as to observe the effect that changes in various variables—from the weather to the weapons employed—would have on the outcome. The foundations for this kind of work were laid by such men as John Neumann, Norbert Wiener, and Thomas Schelling, and in both the U.S.A. and the USSR it has been going on ever since. However, only a very small fraction of the millions of games that must have been played by the experts has ever been published, and most of those are concerned with small-scale, specialized engagements rather than with armed conflict as a

whole. We shall therefore limit the discussion in the present section to the work of one man, Colonel (ret.) Trevor Dupuy, who to our knowledge has made the only serious attempt to date to construct and publish explicit mathematical models which, he claims, make it possible to understand past conflicts (or rather, battles) in digital rather than metaphorical terms.

Dupuy's method, as expounded most fully in his *Numbers, Predictions and War* (New York, 1979), is roughly as follows. First, a theoretical model of the relative power of historical weapons, ranging from the javelin to the one-megaton H bomb, is constructed by analyzing the casualties it might inflict on a densely packed formation of men (one man per square meter) occupying a limited space. Next, the actual relative destructiveness of these weapons is calculated by dividing the result by the average space occupied by troops in battle during various periods. Factors such as attack versus defense (of which Dupuy recognized various kinds, ranging from hasty all the way to fortified), terrain, weather, troop quality, leadership, etc. are then introduced into the equation, and each of them is assigned a numerical value that is based on trial and error. These data, which derive from several historical battles and which are juggled around until they fit the actual outcome, are then applied to other battles to see if they, too, can be fitted into the model. The ultimate result of the method, known as Quantitative Judgement Model or QJM, is a series of equations which, according to Dupuy himself, fits the past with reasonable accuracy and should also be able to predict the outcome of future campaigns and battles if sufficient data were available in advance.

This is not the proper case to evaluate the work of Dupuy and his associates. All that can be said is that it appears to rest on a data base much larger and more detailed than that available to any other historian this author knows of, and that its equations are also more detailed than any others seen by him. If his work is defective on both theoretical and historical grounds—as this author had

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occasion to find out when he tried to apply it to the Battle of El Alamein, obtaining very different results depending on whether or not prisoners of war were counted as casualties—nobody seems to have produced anything better. All in all, the quantitative study of military history is only in its infancy; that it deserves to be continued cannot, in this writer's view, be doubted at all.

In any case, Dupuy's work is only the tip of an iceberg. He may be about the only quantitative historian of war whose findings and methods, whatever their real worth, are available to the public almost in their raw form. Similar methods, however, underlie another important military-historical phenomenon of the last decade and a half, namely the board war game as played by both professionals and amateurs. Once again, such games are not entirely new. Both chess and its less well-known—though equally deserving—Japanese equivalent, (*Go*), started out as war games and for a long time reflected the manner in which wars were actually waged in their respective countries of origin. War games were quite popular among Prussian and Russian staff officers during the early nineteenth century, and if the Austrians refused to learn them as well, this was allegedly because there was no money to be made at them. As is often the case, when the Prussian-German General Staff rose to world prominence following its victories over the Austrians and the French, the war game that it used, the so-called *Kriegspiel*, was endowed with almost mystical qualities: in the eyes of experts and laymen alike, it came to be thought of as one of the principal secrets behind the staff's excellence.

When the German General Staff was purged in 1945, the *Kriegspiel* did not die with it. On the contrary, it was further developed by the addition of operations research and of computers. Though the exact nature and results of the games that were being incessantly played at the Pentagon and in the Kremlin were not, of course, made public, the methodology on which they rely appears to be remarkably similar to that em-

ployed by an entire industry whose purpose is to model past conflicts and enable enthusiasts to replay them as if they were the warlords, or commanders in chief, or generals in charge. Employing methods very similar to Dupuy's, often based on extremely painstaking research and going into a level of detail rarely approached by academic historians, the range of these games and their variety is truly astonishing. One can have a tactical reconstruction of the battle of Nordlingen fought by Gustavus Adolphus in 1634, but the same few dollars will also buy a full-scale model of the principal belligerents in World War II, complete with the various politico-military-industrial-financial factors and the relationships among them. Often accompanied by pamphlets of mathematical rules counting dozens of pages, and increasingly relying on computers to make the necessary calculations and on data links to transmit the information from one player to another, many of these games succeed in reconstructing the past with a degree of urgency and immediacy that is hardly ever achieved by the printed word alone. Furthermore, the games, like no other medium, make it possible for the players to engage in actual competition against an opponent who, as in real war, is to a large extent free to do as he pleases; hence there is also plenty of room for the elements of chance, uncertainty and friction that are too often absent from the pages of military history. The literature that has grown up around this kind of war game during the last decade is vast: besides many periodicals (the most important of which is *Strategy and Tactics*) it is only necessary to mention Nicholas Palmer's *The Comprehensive Guide to War-gaming* (New York, 1977) and S. P. Glick's and I. Chartre's "War, Games and Military History" (*Journal of Contemporary History*, October 1983, pp. 567-82), probably the best analytical treatment of the games and their value to the study of military history. Nor is it amateurs alone who are trying their hand at reconstructing the past in this way; in only slightly modified form, board war games have been adopted by the military and

are being extensively used for tactical, operational and strategic training.

Unlike some of his colleagues in the social sciences, the present writer is not a computer nut. He does not believe that quantitative history invariably stands for better or even more accurate history, nor that it is necessary to jump to attention and salute every time an equation or graph or table are presented in evidence. It appears quite clear, however, that the new methods based on quantitative analysis on the one hand, and on war-gaming on the other, do present unique advantages of their own, and that traditional military history with its reliance on the printed word, maps and the occasional picture can only ignore those advantages at its own cost. If there is any obvious lacuna in existing military historical literature that cries out to be filled, surely it is the need to integrate these various approaches and use the methods of each in order to enrich the others: for it is by combining existing elements in new ways that advances in historiography, as in any other field, are made.

IV

Summing up this paper, it might perhaps be said that military history has reached the mid-1980s alive and well, itself no mean achievement if the sorry state of such disciplines as psychohistory and international relations is used as a measuring rod. Not only has military history retained its attractiveness as a form of popular entertainment, but it has also succeeded in recapturing lost ground among the professionals of war and among political decision makers who, as recently as fifteen years ago, were on the point of discarding it altogether if they had not done so already.⁸ Ridding itself of some long established traditions and stereotypes, military history during the period under discussion has also branched out into numerous new and promising directions, though much more remains to be done. Also, some new approaches and new methodologies made their appearance, though their integration with the mainstream of traditional and par-

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ticularly academic military history remains far from complete at this writing.

All in all, and contrary to the opinion of some who insist that there is a crisis in military historiography, the picture presented is quite encouraging. This does not mean that there are no gaps to be filled and weaknesses to be corrected—on the contrary, it was one of the declared purposes of the present article to point out those gaps and those weaknesses. Nor if it by any means certain that the present favorable climate to military history will necessarily continue, for much of that climate is the product of factors beyond the scope of the discipline proper, and those factors may well change again.

In the near future, much will depend on the military historians themselves. To survive they must continue to branch out in new and relevant directions, adopt new methodologies borrowed from other fields or developed by themselves, and integrate their findings into the mainstream of historical research. Alternatively, they may once again allow themselves to be imprisoned by stereotypes, old-fashioned thinking and, in the case of academic military history, sheer bigotry. Provided military historians can meet this challenge, however, the present writer sees no cause for anxiety, and to those who insist that military history is in a crisis, or that it stands in need of socializing or that it has outlived its usefulness, the reply can only be *epure si muove*.⁹

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NOTES

1. Richard Perle, "Technology and the Quiet War," *Strategic Review*, Winter 1983, p. 35.
2. Text of President Ronald Reagan's July 8, 1981 Arms Transfer Policy Directive. The White House, July 8, 1981.
3. Interview conducted with director of procurement, Raytheon. Washington, D.C., June 21, 1983.
4. President Reagan's letter to House and Senate leaders transmitting proposed bill to amend the Export Administration Act, April 4, 1983.
5. "Offset/Coproduction Requirements in the Aerospace and Electronics Trade," Report of a Survey of Industry, Department of The Treasury, May 24, 1983, p. 2.
6. "How Defense Will Handle Critical Technology Exports—and Why," *National Security*, May 1979, p. 16.
7. "COCOM Rejects Bid to Ban New Technologies to Eastern Bloc," *Electronic News*, May 16, 1983.
8. "An Analysis of Export Control of U.S. Technology—A D.O.D. Perspective," Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Export of U.S. Technology, February 4, 1976, Washington, D.C.
9. "International Transfer of Technology, Goods, Services and Munitions," Department of Defense Directive, January 17, 1984, No. 2040.2, p. 2.
10. Interviews with various government officials and private contractors conducted in Washington, D.C., June 1983. Not for attribution.
11. "Standardization of Equipment Within NATO," Ninth Report to Congress, January 1983. Caspar Weinberger, Secretary of Defense.
12. "Congress Draws Itself into Foreign Policy Formulation," Clyde Farnsworth, *New York Times*, March 25, 1984.
13. "Soviet Acquisition of Western Technology," CIA, April 1982.
14. "Scientific Communication and National Security," National Academy of Sciences (Washington, National Academy Press, 1982).
15. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, Department of Defense, Technology Control Program Report to the 98th Congress, February 1983—requested funding of \$11.6 million and 157 personnel for technology control programs for fiscal year 1984. In 1983, DOD made a one-time transfer of \$20 million to U.S. Customs Service's Operation Exodus.
16. Interview with official in the office of the deputy assistant secretary of defense (international economic, trade and security policy), June 20, 1983. Not for attribution.
17. Joint statement by Secretary Baldrige and Ambassador Brock, Spring, 1983. Office of the United States Trade Representative, Washington, D.C. (These figures are constantly cited, yet source and derivation are not.)
18. Comments of a U.S. corporation with extensive and varied experience in international production. Internal memo, not for attribution.
19. Report to the House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services, Special Subcommittee on

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NATO, "Standardization, Interoperability, Readiness," June 22, 1978.

20. Karl Harr, Jr., president of the Aerospace Industries Association of America, Inc. Letter to Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Thayer, March 4, 1983.
21. Joseph Gavin, Jr., president of Grumman Corporation, in personal correspondence with the author, April 27, 1983.
22. Export Administration Act: Hearings before the Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs, United States Senate, February 3, 1983, p. 3.
23. Caspar Weinberger, "Department of Defense: The Technology Transfer Control Program," Report to the 98th Congress, February 1983, p. 9.
24. Richard Perle, "Technology and the Quiet War," *Strategic Review*, Winter 1983, p. 35.
25. I am grateful to Brigadier General H. V. Larson (USAF-Ret.) for the "bucket" analogy.