

The Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare

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The appearance of a paperback version of an important book first published in 1995 is most welcome as it will make it more readily available. Equally, it is not easy to review such a work. The scholarly reviews that appeared noting its contents do not require emendation, because the book has not been rewritten. Instead, I propose to focus on how the book looks from the perspective of military history at the present moment, although that is inevitably a somewhat personal account.

Let me start with the praise that this book amply merits. It is all too easy when one is given space for a lengthy review for the praise to make scant impact, as it tends to occupy proportionally little space. After all, there are only so many ways to say that this is a well-written and handsomely-presented volume, that the illustrations are pertinent, and the captions interesting, that the range of scholarship is impressive, and that it has all been pulled together by the finest military historian currently writing, who has also contributed several important sections, and has had to balance the conflicting pressures of subject and space.

My description of Parker as the finest military historian is not intended to offend others, but his reputation as such is in my view secure because in his great work, *The Military Revolution*, he displayed a willingness to engage with the situation outside Europe and an ability to relate developments there with those within Europe that has evaded most other military historians who, alas, have very much focused on the Western tradition. The last, for example, is a drawback with Michael Howard's latest work, *The Invention of Peace. Reflections on War and International Order* (2000).

However, it is from this point that I wish to develop my main concern with Parker's important book. I understand fully the problems of the task he has been set and am most impressed by the range, but I became unhappy once I opened the book. For the cover title is translated into a title page where it appears with the subtitle *The Triumph of the West*. In his preface, Parker offers three valid defences:

'First, it would be impossible to provide adequate coverage in a single volume of the military history of all major cultures. Second, merely to pay lip-service ... while devoting the lion's share of the attention to the West, would be unpardonable distortion. Finally ... over the last two centuries the western way of war has become dominant all over the world ... The rise and development of this dominant tradition, together with the secret of its success, therefore seems worthy of examination and analysis'.

This is expanded in the introduction:

'For most of the past 2,500 years, military and naval superiority rather than better resources, greater moral rectitude, irresistible commercial acumen or, until the nineteenth century, advanced economic organisation underpinned western expansion. This military edge meant that the West seldom suffered successful invasion itself. Armies from Asia and Africa rarely marched into Europe and many of the exceptions - Xerxes, Hannibal, Attila, the Arabs and the Turks - achieved only short-term success'.

This highlights the problem of assessment. Is, for example, Arab success in Spain or Turkish in the Balkans less important than the shorter-term Western colonial sway over much of the world in 1870-1960?

Leaving aside such specific points, it is unclear that it is appropriate to focus on the West to the detriment of developments elsewhere. These are important for many reasons, not least for the military history of the West. For example, the military history of other societies helps to explain what the West had to encounter when it expanded. Only a global perspective, even in the era of Western imperial dynamism, can provide a reliable assessment of what constitutes military capability.

Secondly, the military history of other societies offers a valuable comparative narrative that provides an opportunity to look at the analyses deployed in Western military historiography. Thirdly, a focus on non-Western societies that challenged those of Europe enables us to offer a different account of European military history, specifically one that focuses on eastern Europe. This helps undermine the misleading attempt to develop a dominant paradigm of Europe military history, as it is clear that, at any one time, there was a multiple 'tasking'. In addition, a reminder of the diversity of non-Western military circumstances helps underline the complexity of the vexed question of relative capability.

The Eurocentric approach may appear to be valid when studying 1900, when European states and military methods did indeed dominate most of the world, but less so for 1800, still more 1700. More specifically, as far as the Parker volume is concerned, it is also possible to query some of the coverage of the Western tradition. For example, in the eighteenth century there is discussion of the War of the Spanish Succession and the Seven Years' War, but not of the Wars of the Polish and Austrian Succession. This is not simply a matter of the problems of what to include, but also has an impact on assessments of military developments. In this particular case, Saxe is ignored, and there is no explicit consideration of why some armies/states merit more attention than others.

The coverage of the early-nineteenth century is questionable and apparently reflects the problem of a schematic model. We move from John Lynn on *Nations in Arms 1763-1815* to Williamson Murray on *The Industrialisation of War 1815-71*. What we don't get are the South American Wars of Liberation or more than a few lines on warfare in the period 1816-53. This is unfortunate, because this is not simply an issue of what to include when space is at a premium, but also the chronology and analysis that is offered. The history of Western warfare in the nineteenth century is of course generally dominated by the Napoleonic wars and the conflicts of 1854-71, but that leads to a downplaying of the intervening period. In particular, the counterinsurgency warfare in Latin America, and in Europe in the 1820s - 40s has received insufficient attention, which is in line with a military history that places a premium on warfare between the regular

forces of defined states. Industrialisation does not best describe campaigns such as the Austrian operations in Italy in 1821 or the Russian suppression of the Polish rising of 1830 the following year, a campaign in which over 100,000 Russian troops were deployed. In 1848-9, the effectiveness and strength of both the Austrian and the Russian military was demonstrated. Furthermore, it would be mistaken to exaggerate the conservatism of military thought and practice prior to the 1850s. For example, partly as a consequence of their experience in Algeria, the French displayed an interest in new military techniques and ideas.

The need to incorporate the 'non-West' is more complex than one of simply discussing China et al, although that is of great importance. It is also important to devise analyses and categorisations that make sense in non-Western terms, a need that is not generally met. Any stress on variety is not a matter simply of recording an interesting diversity of military practice, but is, instead, crucial to the argument that different military practices and systems were appropriate in different parts of the world.

We are talking about the requirement for a rethinking of military history, and the construction of a new narrative and new analytical systems. Doubtless inadequately, I have been trying to do this in a number of studies including *War and the World, 1450-2000* (1998), *War. Past, Present and Future* (2000), *Western Warfare 1775-1882* (2001), and *War in the Twenty-first Century* (2001).

This process of rethinking has not only to include the non-West but also to acknowledge the multiplicity of military tasking. For example, most military history focuses on state to state conflict and, when it considers civil warfare, it does so by looking at examples, most prominently the American and English Civil Wars, that closely approximate to state to state conflict. Thus, there is a lack of attention to insurgency and counterinsurgency warfare. Yet this is important. Civil conflict highlights the role of contingency and thus opens the way to the counterfactual speculations that are important when assessing the consequences of warfare, and that Parker very helpfully probed when he wrote on the likely consequences had Spanish forces landed in England in 1588. This counterfactualism is needed to contest the determinism that affects some of the 'new military history', which has moved away from operational history with its kaleidoscope of possibilities. As an example of the importance of civil warfare, in Latin America since 1940 there has been state to state conflict, most obviously the Falklands War, but that has been far less important for military tasking than counterinsurgency and operations. This is an aspect of the social politics of the military that needs to be considered carefully. These politics tend to be downplayed because of a focus on the material culture of war, specifically the role of military technology. These are not simply general points, but also ones with particular applicability. For example, discussion of warfare in the period 1815-71 is dominated by the Crimean War, the American Civil War, and the 'Wars of German unification'. However, the notion of a linear continuum of 'progress' towards modern war in this period is dubious. Instead, a more complex dynamic is necessary, one that incorporates important cases of warfare that are largely ignored, either in terms of location (Latin America) or type (insurgency and counterinsurgency). This underlines the misleading nature of the 'canonical' account of military history with its focus on a relatively narrow range of conflicts and battles. There is an ethical issue - the need not to write out of history, by focusing elsewhere, many who fought and suffered; but also a powerful intellectual reason focusing on the weaknesses of the stereotypical account.

In the Western world in this period, the potential to apply more resources was linked to their greater availability, thanks to demographic growth, industrialisation and militarization, and the utilisation of these through effective systems of recruitment, taxation and borrowing. It was less clear how best to employ these forces, and this helps to account for interest in military science and theory, as did the intellectualisation of subjects in an age of increasingly self-conscious specialisation and professionalisation. Political and organisational changes were closely linked to military tasking and capability. A comparison for example of the British capture of Manila in 1762 with that of Alexandria in 1882 reveals very different military systems. So does the very limited French presence in Madagascar and South-East Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and their conquest of Madagascar and Indochina in the late nineteenth.

If modernity is to be approached in terms of mechanisation, then it is unclear why we should focus on a

particular machine or group of machines. Why the tank and the plane and not the ironclad, or why the latter and not the great ocean-going wooden warships of earlier centuries?

A sense of the potency of the new can be glimpsed repeatedly. Major-General Thomas Grosvenor noted of the bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807:

'The Congreve arrows [rockets] made a very singular appearance in the air. Six or seven comet-like appearances racing together ... The train was set on fire ... the Great Church was on fire to the very pinnacles of the steeples. The appearance was horrifyingly grand'.

More generally, conflict in 1914-45 does not define modern war. It is also necessary to look to the insurrectionary and counterinsurgency warfare that followed 1945, especially the anti-colonial struggles, and to the ideological conflicts of the Cold War, many of which were civil wars. Thus, an understanding of the multiplicity and variety of conflict opens our eyes to the very varied character of military modernity. This variety has to be understood not in terms of a differential 'take up' of a given model of military organisation, equipment and conduct, but, rather, as a response to very different circumstances and needs. In short, there was no paradigmatic trajectory which can then be scrutinised in a search for a turning point towards, or of (images vary), modernity.

This is also important if we wish to look ahead, as Parker helpfully does, reminding us (contra Michael Howard in the *THES* this summer) that the proper province of the historical imagination includes the future, for study of the past can provide us with fruitful analytical insights. It is likely that major states will continue to have to plan for symmetrical and asymmetrical conflict, and for high and low-tech operations. Yet it is also necessary, when looking to the future, to accept that such categories are malleable and may indeed require continual redefinition. The last century, and also the last decade, underline the extent of unpredictability in human affairs. Repeatedly, predictions have been proved wrong, both about international relations and about domestic developments. There is no reason to believe that the future will be any different. On the contrary, the pace of change is likely to remain high and will probably become even greater as the normative value of past and present arrangements decline in nearly all human societies.

Conceptual flexibility is important if a tasks - or threats - based approach to force structures and doctrine is taken, rather than, as is often tempting, a capabilities-based approach; in other words if the focus is on the tasks the military may be given and the threats they will confront, rather than simply building up their capability, in particular by acquiring advanced weapons systems. The problem of preparing for the last war, a charge frequently made against the military, can in part be clarified by emphasising the diversity of military tasks and the unpredictability of the manner in which these tasks present themselves in crises and conflicts.

The complexity of military tasking leads to an inevitable tension between politicians and public, who seek to have a military able to take on all tasks, and militaries who point out the difficulty of achieving adequate flexibility with limited resources necessitating the sophisticated management of priorities. Looking to the future, this prioritisation will be most effective if it can escape the constraints of individual service interests, in short if overall forces structures are more than the sum of compartmentalised services. This flexibility will in part depend on political support and direction.

It is possible to envisage many changes over the next century, although military history and discussion is likely to remain focused on the Western approach and on the material culture of war. Furthermore, the importance of maintaining 'order' as a military task may well be underrated because the USA does not use its armed forces for this purpose. Looking to the future, war might be dehumanised by entrusting combat to computers, thus, apparently, taking mechanisation to its logical conclusion. Alternatively, the vulnerability of human societies to environmental damage could be exploited in a systematic form. In short, there is no

reason to believe that the capability of war for adaptation and major change will diminish.

Yet, alongside these ideas, it is more than likely that standard aims will continue and that familiar problems will persist. How can states control dissident groups? How can they guarantee security in an unstable world? How can they use military capability to achieve their objectives short of the unpredictable hazards of war? It is difficult to feel that any of these issues will change. The globalist aspirations of 1945 and 1990 seem defeated by the durability of differences within human society, as much as by the continued centrality of the sovereign state and the lack across much of the world of stable civil societies. One prediction seems safe. Talk of the obsolescence, even end, of war will prove misplaced, and will be mocked by the rictus on the face of the dead.

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