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# Introduction: New Researchers and the Bright Future of Military History

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Sir Max Hastings's recent article bemoaning what he considers to be the demise of military history in the United States of America's academic community generated significant controversy.<sup>1</sup> The veracity of his suggestion is, of course, highly debatable, but the same cannot even be claimed of the study of military history in the UK (a point that Hastings himself acknowledges).<sup>2</sup>

In fact it would seem that the military history community is thriving. A perusal of the profiles of academic staff in 85 UK universities shows that some 68 institutions (80%) employ at least one lecturer with expertise relating to military history. Equally, when examining the *Journal of the Society of Army Historical Research's* lists of PhD theses produced on British Military History in the UK, the numbers appear to be on the rise.<sup>3</sup> Between 2006 and 2009, 82 such theses were listed. A decade later, for the period 2016-2019, the figure is 112. Whilst the increase may be partially attributable to factors such as a greater accessibility of theses through online repositories, and growing opportunities for individuals to embark on PhDs, the fact remains that the evidence of military history being on the decline is scarce.

Why therefore do a number of military historians harbour concerns about the future of the sub-discipline? Hastings's comments actually form part of a longer conversation on the nature of military history and its value in both popular and academic circles.

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<sup>1</sup>Max Hastings, 'American Universities Declare War on Military History', *Bloomberg*, 31 January 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-01-31/max-hastings-u-s-universities-declare-war-on-military-history> Accessed 27 May 2021.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>See for example Ian Beckett, 'Doctoral Dissertations and Research Theses on British Military History', *Journal of the Society of Army Historical Research*, 96, 387 (2018), pp. 289-291. To compile these figures, the equivalent articles for every year between 2006 and 2019 were examined.

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Writing in 2004, Christopher Coker commented on a growing 'disenchantment' with war, resulting from society's growing emphasis on the dehumanising facets of conflict.<sup>4</sup> Whilst Hastings suggests that studying war may assist in its prevention, Lawrence Freedman has previously dismissed this notion as 'too easy'.<sup>5</sup> From this it would seem that military history is struggling to define its purpose, yet such an assessment is too simplistic.

Part of this protracted discussion revolves around the contested definition of what really constitutes 'military history'. The traditional, narrow, perception of the sub-discipline being limited to campaign narratives and strategic studies has remained, despite military history having long since embraced what might be termed the cultural turn. Studies of gender, soldier experiences, and emotion within military contexts, in addition to those exploring the social and political implications of conflict, have extended scholarly frontiers, embracing inter-disciplinary approaches which highlight the field's relevance to a multitude of historical and contemporary discussions.<sup>6</sup> Yet questions have been raised over the extent to which this is 'true' military history, with Frederick Kagan acknowledging their value whilst suggesting that they 'are not a substitute [...] for the serious study of war itself'.<sup>7</sup>

The reality is that military history has diversified, mirroring developments in wider historical discussion by seeking to be a conduit for the understanding of both events and processes, rather than one or the other. The supposed dichotomy between strategic and social military history is arguably an unhelpful distraction, which, as Mark Moyar has argued, 'has harmed the field [of military history] by turning other historians against it'.<sup>8</sup> Just as military history has long since embraced the notion of 'history from below' first articulated by Marxist historian E. P. Thompson, so it has also embraced the new perspectives offered by the cultural turn engaged in by colleagues of social

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<sup>4</sup>Christopher Coker, *The Future of War: The Re-Enchantment of War in the Twenty-First Century*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. xi-xii.

<sup>5</sup>Lawrence Freedman (ed), *War*, (Oxford: OUP, 1994), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Edward Coss, *All for the King's Shilling*, (Norman, Oklahoma University Press, 2010); Gavin Daly, *The British Soldier in the Peninsular War: Encounters with Spain and Portugal, 1808-1814*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Richard S. Grayson & Erica Wald (eds), 'Editorial', *British Journal for Military History*, 6, 2 (2020), p. 1 (p. 1).

<sup>7</sup>Frederick W. Kagan, 'Why Military History Matters', *American Enterprise Institute* (June, 2006), pp. 1-5 (pp. 2-3).

<sup>8</sup>Mark Moyar, 'The Current State of Military History', *The Historical Journal*, 50, 1 (2007), pp. 225-240 (p. 240).

history.<sup>9</sup> That diversification of thought is a positive development, which simply serves to emphasise the value of studying military history as a way of understanding human experiences across time.

Nowhere is the value of this multitude of perspectives more apparent than amongst the emerging talent of the post-graduate community, as showcased at the annual ‘New Researchers’ Conferences and the ‘Three Minute Military Thesis’ competitions organised by the *BJMH*’s parent organisation the ‘British Commission for Military History’. It is within this rich research environment that this ‘New Researchers’ special issue of the *BJMH* provides a welcome and timely reminder of the variety and rigour of academic military history research, and the bright prospects for the sub-discipline’s future.

It was a testament to the scale of research being conducted in the field that over 20 submissions were received in response to this issue’s Call for Papers. As editor, choosing between them was a considerable challenge, though one made fractionally easier by the generous commitment of the journal’s Co-editors to take worthy articles, which did not make the final issue, forward for publication at a future date, such was the quality of the pieces submitted.

The chosen articles reflect the multitude of approaches that are being embraced by emerging military historians. Covering some 700 years of history, they demonstrate the value of embracing inventive approaches to better understand conflict. From Pia Henning’s use of word frequency analysis to shed new light on the development of Prussian wargaming, to Andrew Dorman’s employment of detailed data analysis to assess the capabilities of British troops stationed in Ireland during the eighteenth century and Stephen Moore’s equivalent study for the RAF in the 1940, these articles offer engaging methodologies that can be applied across the entire history community. The multi-faceted nature of modern military-historical study is also apparent, from Anna Glew’s and Megan Kelleher’s studies of memorials and their creation to better understand memory-making in the aftermath of conflicts, to Ryan Barnett’s examination of fourteenth century legal texts to shed new light on notions of justice in the aftermath of war. Nuanced discussions and stimulating theories are equally exhibited throughout, with Jayne Friend’s examination of the use of the Royal Navy’s destroyers following the First World War raising questions of identity and nation building, whilst agency and mental health lie at the heart of Kelsey Power’s exploration of Napoleonic Prisoners of War’s dress. Nor is the operational side of war neglected in this issue. Tristan Griffin examines the weaponisation of hunger by Parliamentary forces whilst exploring Royalist efforts to counter siege famine during the English Civil

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<sup>9</sup>E. P. Thompson, ‘History from Below’, *Times Literary Supplement* 65 (1966), pp.279-280.

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War, whilst Stefan Quiroga sheds new light on the US Army's willingness to employ combatant women during the Vietnam War, and Michael Broughton explains how early information wars over English involvement in the 1580 assault on Mechelen exploited the undefined principles of the fledgling English newspaper industry. That such a varied and insightful collection of rigorous research could be brought together in one publication bodes well for the vibrant future of the military history sub-discipline.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank a number of individuals for their assistance throughout this project. Firstly I am very grateful to the BJMH Co-editors Richard Grayson and Erica Wald for entrusting me with the rare honour of guest-editing this issue, and for providing a platform through which these emerging scholars could showcase their talent in a prestigious publication. Thanks also go to everyone who submitted pieces, the reviewers for their perceptive advice on the submissions, and the BJMH Managing Editors, Alasdair Urquhart and George Wilton, for their patience and attention to detail. I am particularly indebted to the authors for their tireless enthusiasm and the professionalism with which they all approached the, at times challenging, task of embracing suggestions raised at peer-review. Finally, I would like to thank the military history community as a whole for their support and collegiality, which not only contributed to the success of this issue's Call for Papers, but which makes the sub-discipline such a pleasure to be a part of.