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A European History of Michael Howard's *War in European History*

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ABSTRACT
Michael Howard's War in European History, *published in 1976, was one of his most influential works. This article traces its reception in France, Italy and West Germany, contextualising the book within the post-Second World War development of military history in those countries. The 'war and society' approach for which Howard is celebrated developed along distinctive lines in each, so international scholars focused on different aspects of the book.* War in European History *was also used by Umberto Eco to explore the relationship between force and power. His insights offer fresh ways to examine more recent developments in the field of military history.*

Introduction

In 1961, Michael Howard's first milestone contribution to the European history of war was published: *The Franco-Prussian war: the German invasion of France, 1870-1871*.[1] A standard account of Europe's first modern war, it has been reissued many times, most recently in 2021. Sixty years on, it repays re-reading: eminent Italian military historian Nicola Labanca described it as a 'fundamental reconstruction'.[2] While logistics and supply-chains are critical to the analysis, and the description of operations are masterly, Howard also argued in his preface that a straightforward military history could not do full justice to the significance of this conflict, whose political and cultural legacies were so immense. His close attention to the experiences of ordinary soldiers prefigures the growth in this field in the 1970s (John Keegan's *The Face of Battle* was

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[1]Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France, 1870-1871,* (London: Methuen, 1961).
[2]Nicola Labanca, 'Development and Change in the Writing of Military History from World War Two to the Present', Occasional Paper, (International Commission for Military History, 2014).

still fifteen years away). This monograph set out many of Howard's methods and principles: he contextualised technical matters to explain their wider significance. combining operational history with political, social and (some) cultural concerns. He drew almost entirely on French and German-language sources for this work – an approach which might seem obvious today but was sadly not always the case among his contemporaries. Cyril Falls, one of Howard's predecessors as Chichele Professor of the History of War at Oxford, cheerfully wrote a history of the battle of Caporetto without reading a single Italian-language source.[3]

Howard's language skills were one indicator of his mind-set, which was unusual by the standards of British historians of the day, in that he 'saw war in European, if not Eurocentric, terms.'[4] He specifically invoked the historical approach of the great German military historian Hans Delbrück (1848-1929) and regularly drew on the best of European scholarship, such as the copious works of Gerhard Ritter, long before it became available in English. While *The Franco-Prussian War* was undeniably both influential and indicative of Howard's trajectory, it was not translated into other languages. Its influence remained therefore chiefly within the English-speaking world.[5] In 1976, his most important European work emerged: *War in European History*. This was translated into around a dozen languages, first in Western Europe and later in Eastern Europe and beyond.[6]

This article first examines the reception of Michael Howard's *War in European History* in the context of the development of the field of military history in Western Europe. Then it discusses Umberto Eco's reading of *War in European History,* and the insights which Eco's observations – and a re-reading of Howard – might have for historians of European war today.

War in European History and the New Military History in Europe

While *War in European History* took Europe as its subject, it was also a 'European' book in another sense: by the mid-1970s, French and German historians were also exploring

[3]Cyril Falls, *Caporetto 1917,* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966), p. 7.
[4]Hew Strachan, 'Michael Howard and the Dimensions of Military History', *War in History* 27, no. 4 (1 November 2020): p. 543, doi.org/10.1177/0968344520915028 Accessed 30 June 2022.
[5]Analysis of the work's citations via Google Scholar, a rough but indicative metric, shows that while it is still regularly cited it appears overwhelmingly in English-language publications rather than those in other European languages.
[6]Translations were published in Danish (1977), Italian (1978), German (1981), Spanish (1983), French (1988), Czech (1997) Romanian (1997), Greek (2000), Croatian (2002), Polish (2007). Outside Europe, it has appeared in Japanese (1981), Hebrew (1985), Chinese (1998) and Korean (2015) editions.

the history of war with related methodologies. The International Commission for Military History's 1977 bibliographic regulations emphasised that military history was not a discipline limited to technical or operational history, but one which included political, social, economic, cultural, intellectual history and more. Every aspect of the war-making capacities of states and peoples, both at war and in peacetime, should be included. In this regard, it was a book whose time had come. As Howard noted himself in the original foreword, as a work of synthesis it drew heavily on the analysis of many other scholars doing the same kind of work (a process he described, with modest disingenuity, as 'putting together in a very superficial fashion the ideas I have gleaned from others').[7] This was the era of the New Military History: to borrow from Clemenceau, a new generation of scholars embraced the idea that military history was 'too important to be left to the generals'. Though some, like Howard, had themselves served, these writers were predominantly academics, not professional military men. Whatever their period or methodology, they rejected the idea that the technical and practical matters of the battlefield were all that mattered in the history of war. Rapid internationalisation of the field within Europe was a major driver of this evolution. Despite this, it was not until the 1990s that military history earned a complete chapter in most historiographical methodological surveys: only once the 'new' military history was well established, and no longer in any sense new, did the wider scholarly community begin to take it more seriously. It is past time to retire the term, since as Joanna Bourke wrote more than fifteen years ago it is already 'distinctly middle aged'.[8] Nowadays, the vast majority of military history draws to a greater or lesser extent on a 'war and society' approach. Even so staunch an operational military historian as the late Dennis Showalter (who sadly died only a month after Michael Howard) spread his interests far beyond the battlefield. His work on the wars of German unification showed how the morale and combat motivation of troops – and thus their battlefield performance – was intimately linked to the social and political structures of each combatant power.[9] Since the 1970s, this unloved stepchild of Clio has increasingly been accepted as a proper discipline within the historical family – though there are still many outside the field who regard it with suspicion. A brief examination of this process in different contexts can be illuminating.

[7]Michael Howard, *War in European History*, Updated ed, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), Foreword.

[8]Joanna Bourke, 'New Military History', in Matthew Hughes and William J. Philpott, eds., *Palgrave Advances in Modern Military History*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 258, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230625372_14. Accessed 30 June 2022.

[9]Dennis E. Showalter, 'A Modest Plea for Drums and Trumpets', *Military Affairs* 39, no. 2 (1975): pp. 71–74, https://doi.org/10.2307/1986931.

France

French military historiography essays – like their counterparts elsewhere – have had a perennial tendency to lament the state of their field. Before the Second World War, military history lacked both prestige and eminent practitioners in France. One review noted that 'the French tradition has nothing to compare to the magisterial works of Hans Delbrück, in German, nor the clear and elegant synthesis of Charles Oman, in English.'[10] In this period, most works were produced by serving or former officers, tending towards a narrow focus and intellectual conformity. Nor did matters improve in the decades immediately after 1945, as post-war antimilitarism helped keep military history unfashionable (as it did elsewhere). But the main problem in the early and mid-twentieth century was that military history struggled to fit in with France's dominant historiographical trends. In the words of Laurent Henninger, 'Without doubt, war has been the historical object which has suffered the most from the renewal of historical study after the appearance of the *Annales* school.'[11] The *Annales* school, especially in its earliest period, focused almost exclusively on the *longue durée* and rejected the 'event' rather contemptuously. Battle was unmistakably and unavoidably an event, even perhaps, as Henninger notes, 'the archetype of an event', and thus insignificant. Operational history, or *histoire-bataille,* was thus openly disparaged by academics – who nonetheless did not hasten to produce any other kind.

Not until the 1970s did this situation begin to change dramatically, when the third generation of *Annales* scholars led by Emmanuel Leroy Ladurie, Jacques Le Goff, Marc Ferro and others moved towards what became known as the *Nouvelle Histoire*. This 'new history' introduced cultural and anthropological methods to what had previously been a quantitatively-dominated demographic and social approach. Now the event was finally permitted to return, not least thanks to the work of medievalist Georges Duby; this could only be good news for the study of war. In 1978 – the same year *War in European History* was published in England – Le Goff was able to write 'there may now be, there is beginning to be a new history of the military phenomenon.'[12]

However, the French approach to the study of war in its social and cultural context did not begin with the modern era. It was medievalists and early modernists who led the way.[13] Nicola Labanca observed that medieval studies 'absorbed […] Febvre and

[10]Philippe Contamine, 'L'histoire militaire', in *L' Histoire et le métier d'historien en France, 1945-1995*, ed. Maurice Aymard, Yves Marie Bercé, and Jean-François Sirinelli, (Paris : Les Editions de la MSH, 1995), p. 361.

[11]Laurent Henninger, 'La nouvelle histoire-bataille', *Espace Temps* 71, no. 1 (1999): p. 36, https://doi.org/10.3406/espat.1999.4066.

[12]Jacques Le Goff, *La Nouvelle Histoire*, (Paris : Editions Retz, 1978), p. 275.

[13]Robert M. Citino, 'Military Histories Old and New: A Reintroduction', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 112, No. 4 (2007), p. 1077.

Bloch's lesson, as well as of their criticism of the *histoire bataille* that had been advanced thirty years before' in a 'more mature way' than the fields of modern or contemporary history.[14] It was also possible for historians of those periods to free themselves from the interests and priorities of the official histories produced by the armed forces, whereas historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had to contend with institutional gatekeepers who often owned and controlled the archives.

One of the earliest pioneers was André Corvisier, whose 1964 study *L'armée française de la fin du XVIIe siècle au ministère de Choiseul: Le Soldat* drew on the *Annales* tradition of statistical analysis and demographic methods. He used muster rolls to analyse the social composition of the eighteenth century French army, creating an entirely new understanding of the social and regional origins, recruitment patterns and service records of the troops. This was classic *Annales* social history applied to the field of 'military society', and might not have been immediately recognisable to all contemporary observers as military history at all, so innovative did it seem as a way to examine armies. Corvisier concluded that to a considerable extent, the army had professionalised by the end of the century – with important consequences for its performance on the battlefield.[15] In 1976, he expanded his analysis of armed forces and society onto a much grander scale, in *Armées et societés en Europe de 1494 à 1789*. His subject was the totality of military society – recruitment and training, supply, pay, morale and discipline, combat motivation – and its relationship with both the state(s) and the nation(s) from which it was drawn and on whose behalf it fought.[16] Though very different in style and scope to Howard's contemporaneous work, it shared a similar understanding of the boundaries of military history.

In 1972 the medievalist Philippe Contamine published his *Guerre, État et société à la fin du Moyen Âge,* a social and institutional history of the armies raised by the kings of France during the Hundred Years War.[17] It was warmly reviewed in the *Annales* journal for its innovative approach and use of new sources, such as financial documents, receipts and account books.[18] As with Corvisier's work, quantitative methodologies allowed major social changes in late medieval France to be traced through the study

[14]Labanca, 'Development and Change'.
[15]André Corvisier, *L'armée française de la fin du XVIIe siècle au ministère de Choiseul: Le soldat,* (Presses universitaires de France, 1964).
[16]André Corvisier, *Armées et societés en Europe de 1494 à 1789,* (Paris: Presses Universitaire de France, 1976).
[17]Philippe Contamine, *Guerre, État et société à la fin du Moyen Âge. Études sur les armées des rois de France 1337-1494,* (Paris: Mouton, 1972).
[18]Bernard Guenée, 'Philippe Contamine, Guerre, État et Société à la fin du Moyen Âge. Études sur les armées des rois de France, 1337-1494', *Annales* 29, no. 6 (1974): pp. 1532–34.

of the royal armies. Contamine followed this in 1978 with *La Vie quotidienne pendant la guerre de Cent ans: France et Angleterre (XIVè siècle),* a ground-breaking comparative study of material culture and the history of daily life, an approach to understanding the Hundred Years' War – and warfare in general – which opened up many new possibilities. The *Nouvelle Histoire* encouraged a focus on all forms of material culture, including the historical developments of technology. But rather than limiting analysis of military technology strictly to its impact on the battlefield, Contamine contextualised it within the complex world of military society. However, this was not to advocate military history with all the battle taken out. In a later essay he wrote:

> Most French military historians would recognise themselves and acknowledge their deep kinship in the well-known formula of [nineteenth century military theorist] Ardent du Picq: 'Combat is the final purpose of armies, and man is the first instrument of combat'.[19]

So, he argued, the study of operations required the context of the political and sovereign power in which they occur and the study of both officers and the rank-and-file, both as military personnel and as part of the general population.

It is clear, then, that France boasted its own emergent 'war and society' school of medieval and early modern European history in the 1960s and 1970s. However, in 1983, the future president of the French Commission for Military History Hervé Coutau-Bégarie was still able to complain that French military history was 'a desert' outside the medieval period, and that operational military history was completely moribund (it remains perhaps the weakest subsection of the field within France to this day).[20] It was in this context that Howard's *War in European History* appeared in French in 1988; perhaps at the behest of the publisher, the title was altered to 'War in the History of the West'.[21] For Georges Buis in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, it was a 'masterwork' in which Howard wrote with 'justified confidence, talent, humour'.[22] As Coutau-Bégarie noted, it was strange that Howard had to wait over a decade for this 'marvellous little book', full of 'discreet erudition', to appear in France. Coutau-Bégarie, an expert on strategy, focused closely on the role of new technologies in his review and paired this 'passionate' read with William McNeill's 1982 book *The Pursuit of Power. Technology, Armed Force and Society since A.D. 1000* (which would not appear

[19]Contamine, 'L'histoire militaire', p. 359–60.
[20]Hervé Coutau-Bégarie, *Le phenomene 'nouvelle histoire': stratégie et idéologie des nouveaux historiens,* (Paris: Economica, 1983), pp. 183–87.
[21]Michael Howard, *La Guerre dans l'histoire de l'Occident*, trans. Didier Sénécal, Géopolitiques et stratégies, (Paris: Fayard, 1988).
[22]Georges Buis, 'La guerre dans l'histoire de l'Occident', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, July 1988.

in French until 1992). He observed that 'whatever the Annales school may say', military history had much more to offer, building on Howard and McNeill's approaches, since war was a subject which could serve as a 'privileged matrix for the history of the West'.[23] What, then, did Howard's book offer that the supposed 'desert' of French military history ignored? A greater focus on war itself, rather than on military societies in peacetime. Equally important, for Coutau-Bégarie, was its ability to bring the new military history into the contemporary field – something which was still then lacking in France.

By 1995, however, a new orthodoxy was emerging in France, as seen in Corvisier's collection of essays entitled *La Guerre. Essais Historiques.* He posited that the essential condition of military history, if it is 'to be of use to military decision makers and also illuminate general history, is the removal of military history from its own enclave, and its opening up to all the domains of history'. He highlighted the numerous 'domains connected to war: psychological, technical, judicial, demographic, economic, institutional, social, cultural, spiritual, moral and political'.[24] This willingness to link military history to the present, and to contemporary military decision makers, shows how completely the field had been transformed.

Italy

Whereas in France the study of war and society was already established by the 1970s, Italian military history had developed along different lines. Its traditions were inevitably shaped by the experiences of fascism; even after 1945, the new democratic Italy's military histories showed a remarkable degree of continuity with the flag-waving style of those produced in the inter-war period. Here the impetus of the international historiography would prove particularly important. In the 1960s and 1970s, an increasing number of major works on the history of war by figures like Fritz Fischer, Steven Runciman, Gerhard Ritter and Marc Ferro were translated into Italian; John Gooch's *Armies in Europe* (1980) received an Italian edition in 1982.[25] Italian scholarly publishing, in other words, closely followed international trends. The contrast with the last decade is marked: during the Centenary of the First World War, Italian publishing houses overwhelmingly ignored contemporary international scholarship in favour of translating or reissuing old classics.

[23]Hervé Coutau-Bégarie, 'Michael Howard. La Guerre Dans l'histoire de l'Occident [Compte-Rendu]', *Politique Étrangère* 53, no. 2 (1988): p. 521.

[24]André Corvisier, *La guerre : essais historiques,* (Paris: Perrin, 2005). New ed. with foreword and conclusion by Hervé Coutau-Bégarie; p. 6, p. 18.

[25]For a review of Gooch and Howard's books together, see Pier Franco Taboni, 'Alcuni studi di lingua inglese sulla violenza e le guerre', *Il Pensiero* XXIV–XXV, no. 1–2 (April 1983).

The first Italian edition of *War in European History* was published in 1978; as it had been in France, the title was altered, this time emphasising 'war and weapons' in the history of Europe.[26] Unlike the English original, the Laterza edition featured 129 black and white images, many previously unpublished, all selected and captioned by the Italian translator Francesco Calvani. The images range from manuscript illustrations of mounted knights and photographs of medieval fortifications, through cartoons and paintings to technical diagrams of modern battleships and photographs of inter-continental missiles. The vast majority focus on technologies of battle, from weapons to defence systems; a few highlight the technologies of armaments production and transport. Like the subtly altered title, the effect is to shift the emphasis of the text onto technology, since the illustrations do not reflect the social, cultural and political effects of military developments.

In a 1979 essay on the New Military History, Francesco Bogliari called Howard's book 'an excellent contribution', with a persuasive methodology. Bogliari hoped that the prompt translation of *War in European History* would offer 'a stimulus for the Italian historiography to turn towards that of other European countries, the protagonist in recent years of considerable progress'.[27] In his view, military history in Italy was almost uniquely prone to 'corporative isolation', long serving as the 'private hunting reserve of professional soldiers or those few scholars who offer reassuring ideological and political guarantees.'

The roots of this problem lay partly in the considerable practical difficulties of accessing the Italian army archives, which endure to this day. These were (and remain) partly due to inadequate funding. There is also the legal requirement that users of the archives sign a document swearing that they will not use any archival materials to 'damage the image or honour of the Italian Armed Forces, or otherwise defame them', a criminal offence dating back to 1930 which today incurs a substantial fine, but which prior to 2006 implied a prison sentence.[28] This law infringes upon academic freedom and specifically on the possibilities of critical military history; in practice, it often meant that only 'sympathetic' histories were produced in the first decades after the Second

[26]Michael Howard, *La guerra e le armi nella storia d'Europa*, trans. Francesco Calvani, (Bari: Laterza, 1978).

[27]Francesco Bogliari, 'I nuovi problemi della storiografia militare', *Ricerche Storiche* IX, no. 1 (1979): p. 197.

[28]Like many fascist-era laws in Italy, which linger on the statute books despite apparently contravening principles of the 1948 Constitution, such as the right to freedom of speech and the press, this law is still in operation. In 2021, Italian rapper and influencer Fedez was charged with defamation against the armed forces over the lyrics of one of his songs.

World War. This in part helps us to understand the 'patriotic paradigm' which endured until the end of the 1960s.[29]

One man has almost single-handedly challenged this approach: Giorgio Rochat. Deeply interested in the political (and to a lesser extent, social) history of the Italian army, in 1967 he published an important and innovative analysis of the army's political role between the end of the First World War and the consolidation of the fascist dictatorship.[30] Rochat saw most Italian military history in this era as featuring 'unilateral nationalism, intolerance towards all forms of dissent, lack of scientific standards and a marked political instrumentalisation'. In a sweeping denunciation, he wrote that the vast majority of Italian military history production from the 1940s to the end of the 1960s was revanchist, lazy, narrowly technical and 'wholly lacking in historiographical value'.[31]

The politicisation of the Italian academy and the persistent refusal of many left-wing historians to study war was certainly one part of this problem. In the late 1960s an important new approach to the history of war began, with the highly innovative work of Mario Isnenghi, a cultural historian with a background in literary studies. His early works on representation, myth and memory were pioneering (it remains an enormous shame that they were never translated, which would have earned them the international attention they deserved).[32] At the same time, Italian social history was flourishing – and soon turned its attention to soldiers as a subset of the working class. The Second World War and the Resistance were particularly fruitful areas for this approach, as for instance in the edited collection *Operai e Contadini nella crisi italiana del 1943-44*, or the influential and innovative oral histories by Nuto Revelli.[33] But the social and cultural histories of war which began to proliferate in the 1960s and 1970s were initially kept – or choose to keep – at arm's length from military history.

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[29]Marco Mondini, 'L'historiographie italienne face à la Grande Guerre : saisons et ruptures', *HISTOIRE@POLITIQUE* 22, no. jan-avr (2014). http://www.histoire-politique.fr/index.php?numero=22&rub=dossier&item=208. Accessed 30 June 2022.

[30]Giorgio Rochat, *L'esercito italiano da Vittorio Veneto a Mussolini (1919-1925),* (Bari: Laterza, 1967).

[31]Giorgio Rochat, *L'Italia nella prima guerra mondiale: problemi di interpretazione e prospettive di ricerca,* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1976) Introduction.

[32]Mario Isnenghi, *I vinti di Caporetto nella letteratura di guerra* (Padova: Marsilio, 1967); Mario Isnenghi, *Il mito della grande guerra: da Marinetti a Malaparte* (Bari: Laterza, 1970).

[33]Gianfranco Bertolo, ed., *Operai e contadini nella crisi italiana del 1943-1944,* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1974); Nuto Revelli, *L'ultimo fronte: Lettere di soldati caduti o dispersi nella seconda guerra mondiale,* (Turin: Einaudi, 1971); Nuto Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti,* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977).

Perhaps the first solid example of Italian 'New Military History' was Rochat and Giulio Massobrio's *Breve Storia del Esercito* (1978). This volume's focus on colonial wars – hitherto almost completely neglected in Italy – helped drive the incorporation of a broader approach, since many of Italy's colonial battles were impossible to analyse without considering social context.[34] Since their conduct made little sense in narrowly military terms, what Bogliari termed the 'disconcerting' outcome of operations had to be explained with reference to social and cultural history, and the history of mentalities.[35] From the 1980s onwards the flourishing fields of Italian social and cultural history of war have gradually come together with more traditional military histories: the landmark history of the First World War co-written by Rochat and Isnenghi in 2000 is an excellent example.[36]

West Germany

War in European History was also well-received in West Germany, with several reviewers highlighting its debt to Delbrück, and a German translation was published in 1981.[37] An early review came from eminent early modern military historian Hans Schmidt, who taught army officers at the Bundeswehr University in Munich. Schmidt saw the book as essentially 'a great essay' written 'in an extraordinarily spirited and stimulating way'. He highlighted two key features: one, the extent to which social and cultural changes might influence technical developments – rather than the other way around – and two, Howard's remarks about the nuclear age. He quoted directly from the conclusion: 'Nothing has occurred since 1945 to indicate that war, or the threat of it, could not still be an effective instrument of state policy. Against peoples who are not prepared to defend themselves it might be very effective indeed.' Endorsing this view, Schmidt criticised 'a dangerous and illusory decline in military readiness, especially in the West, which means a weakening of its political position' as a result of popular assumptions about nuclear strategy. To a scholar involved in professional military education, and concerned about West German security, this seemed one of the crucial aspects of the book.[38] By contrast, French and Italian scholars appeared less interested in the links Howard proposed to contemporary defence policy.

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[34]Giorgio Rochat and Giulio Massobrio, *Breve storia dell'esercito italiano dall'1861 a 1943,* (Turin: Einaudi, 1978).

[35]Bogliari, 'I nuovi problemi della storiografia militare', pp. 206–7.

[36]Mario Isnenghi and Giorgio Rochat, *La Grande Guerra, 1914-1918,* (Milan: La Nuova Italia, 2000).

[37]Michael Howard, *Der Krieg in der europäischen Geschichte. Vom Ritterheer zur Atomstreitmacht*, trans. Karl Heinz Silber, (Munich: Beck, 1981). Reissued 2010.

[38]Hans Schmidt, 'Michael Howard, War in European History, 1976', *Francia. Forschungen zur Westeuropäischen Geschichte* 5 (1977): pp. 814–15, https://doi.org/10.11588/fr.1977.0.48936. Accessed 30 June 2022.

Unsurprisingly, German military historians tended to be greatly interested in the political history of the armed forces. They were concerned about both historical and contemporary national defence policies, and took it as axiomatic that relationships between armed forces and the state were particularly important within totalitarian systems. The need to grapple with the Nazi (and fascist) past was undeniable, but at the same time was often implicit rather than directly addressed. The official Military History Research Office of the German army, the *Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt* (MGFA) was created in the 1950s but not until 1971 did it begin directly to research the Third Reich. Many of its historians, such as Jürgen Förster, were keen to critically examine the political dimensions of the army's wartime actions, but debate over the 'proper' limits of its work was intense.

In the 1980s these discussions became abruptly very public in the so-called *Historikerstreit*, or historians' dispute. This frequently vituperative debate over the place of Nazism and the Holocaust in German national history incorporated multiple strands – ethical, intellectual and political. However, one strand of the controversy contained, at its heart, questions around the relationship between events on the battlefield, and the societies and ideologies engaged in war. Could historians write about the war of 1939-1945 without discussing the Holocaust? Could veterans and their families commemorate that military service, without engaging with the realities of the Nazi regime? Andreas Hillgruber's 1986 work *Zweierlei Untergang* posited that historians ought to 'identify' with the struggles of the Wehrmacht and try to enter into the mentalities and concerns of German soldiers fighting on the Eastern Front in 1944-45.[39] This was certainly not a plea for operations-only *histoire bataille*, but it shared with that approach an unwillingness to confront the wider political and ethical issues around the subject. Other participants in the debate, such as Ernst Nolte, argued that the entire twentieth century was so stained with mass murder, genocidal violence, tyranny and population displacement that there was little, if anything, distinctive about the Nazi regime. This relativist approach opened the context of the German war of 1939-45 so widely as to create an almost meaningless frame of comparison. Such revisionist accounts of the Second World War had clear political implications, both domestic and international. The vigorous responses of Jürgen Habermas and many international scholars soon took the discussion far beyond the scope of military history, but the debate also raised important points for military historians: if we write about war in ways which go beyond the battlefield, what are the consequences? What ethical, social and political responsibilities does a 'war and society' approach entail?

[39]Andreas Hillgruber, *Zweierlei Untergang. Die Zerschlagung des Deutschen Reiches und das Ende des europäischen Judentums,* (Berlin: Siedler, 1986).

The *Historikerstreit* was both a debate about intellectual approaches to the past and a reflection of its particular historical moment. Cold War-era military histories which downplayed the realities of Nazism were not uncommon. J F C Fuller's 1961 survey of warfare since the French Revolution offered an analysis of the relative threats posed by Soviet and German totalitarianism very similar to that of some German nationalist history in the 1980s.[40] Perhaps given Fuller's known Nazi sympathies this should be no surprise, yet the book has been much praised for its strategic insights and continues to be translated (into French in 2007) and reprinted (most recently in 2016 by Routledge). Incidentally, Fuller's book received a highly complimentary cover blurb from none other than Michael Howard himself.[41] Fuller, like many of the old French practitioners of *histoire bataille,* wrote from the perspective of the military itself, with an eye to institutional reform and the future conduct of war. The field of War Studies, which Howard did so much to establish in the United Kingdom, draws at least in part on this outlook. Many practitioners still believe that military history's job is to learn lessons about war the better to conduct it in the future; that the field's purpose is to serve policymakers and the armed forces.[42] Examples include, for instance, the analysis of wars of colonial oppression in order to hone contemporary counter-insurgency strategy.[43] But nowadays both academic military historians and many of those working within the professional circles of the armed forces embrace a 'war and society' approach; the ethical and political questions about the study of the history of war highlighted so clearly in the *Historikerstreit* require consideration by all kinds of military scholars – and are inherently interdisciplinary. Arguably, the recent emergence of the field of Critical Military Studies reflects this idea. Both historical and (especially) contemporary military subjects are scrutinised from ethical and philosophical perspectives, driven by imperatives which have emerged in the twenty-first century's so-called 'forever wars'.[44] The sociological and anthropological perspectives brought to bear in this field show one of the ways in which the 'war and society' approach has fruitfully evolved over the last forty years.

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[40]John Frederick Charles Fuller (Major-General), *The Conduct of War. 1789-1961. A Study of the Impact of the French, Industrial, and Russian Revolutions on War and Its Conduct,* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1961).

[41]Richard J Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow : West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past,* (New York: Pantheon, 1989), p. 176.

[42]Virgilio Ilari, 'Per una epistemologia della storia militare', in *Clausewitz in Italia*, by Virgilio Ilari, (Rome: Aracne, 2020), 246–47.

[43]Frederick H. Dotolo, 'A Long Small War: Italian Counterrevolutionary Warfare in Libya, 1911 to 1932', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 26, no. 1 (2 January 2015): pp. 158–80, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2014.959765. Accessed 30 June 2022.

[44]See the journal *Critical Military Studies* (Taylor and Francis), launched in 2015.

Language, Power, Force

To read *War in European History* more than forty years after its publication is to note anew the qualities first praised by contemporaries – readability, synthesis – while observing how much the field has changed, largely through its omissions (gender, race, the global turn to name just a few). The original bibliography is almost entirely male: today such a book would draw on the scholarship of women too. However, to think more with and about the book today, we may turn to another, perhaps unexpected, contemporary reading of it. Howard's book was discussed by Umberto Eco in his 1979 essay *La Lingua, Il Potere, La Forza* – Language, Power, Force – in the unlikely company of an anthology of Michel Foucault essays and Roland Barthes' *Leçon*, alongside Georges Duby's newly published magnum opus on feudal Europe, *Les Trois Ordres ou L'Imaginaire du féodalisme.*[45] Eco's essay appeared in the launch issue of *Alfabeta*, a high-end cultural magazine edited by avant-garde poet Nanni Balestrini (who fled Italy to escape arrest shortly after the first issue emerged, suspected of being an active sympathiser of left-wing terrorist organisation Autonomia Operaia). It published discursive, highly intertextual review essays, which each analysed three or four books or films (both old and new) to explore a 'field of problems'. Eco's piece exemplified this approach, offering less a book review than a complex and meandering set of reflections on the nature of power and its forms of expression.[46]

In this essay, Eco posited *War in European History* as a book which both reflected and illuminated the contemporary moment. He read Howard as offering both a historical overview of the field of power – specifically, the state's power to enact war – and an insight into the way that field was currently being re-thought and re-interpreted. Of course, Eco's reading was also deeply of its moment in this same way, reflecting the late 1970s preoccupation with the nature of power and its relationship both with individuals and with wider society.[47] Much of the essay concerns the ways in which Foucault and Barthes explored power through language and as a system of symbols. Eco also discussed the ways language, rhetoric and ideology controlled, disciplined and superseded the complex and varied inter-relations of the Three Orders – clergy, nobility and third estate – in medieval Europe, as explored by the eminent *Annalist* Duby.[48] In Eco's reading, the crucial issue in the organisation of medieval European society was the relationship between power and force; language and rhetoric disciplined this relationship, by legitimising some uses of force and criminalising others.

[45]Umberto Eco, 'La Lingua, Il Potere, La Forza', in *Alfabeta (Antologia) 1979-1988*, ed. Rossana Bossaglia et al., (Milan: Bompiani, 2012), pp. 451–72.

[46]Filippo Pennacchio, 'Attraverso campi di problemi. Le "pseudo-recensioni" di "Alfabeta"', in *Leggere per scegliere. La pratica della recensione nell'editoria moderna e contemporanea*, ed. Andrea Chiurato, (Milan: Mimesis, 2020), p.164.

[47]Pennacchio, pp. 167–69.

[48]Georges Duby, *Les trois ordres ou l'Imaginaire du féodalisme,* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

He wrote: 'Ideology takes form: its power becomes a true network of consensus from below, because relationships of force have been transformed into symbolic relationships.'[49] However, as he noted, power relations – taken here to mean symbolic discourses in which language names and shapes the relationships of social groups – overlie encounters between forces (social groups, movements, pressures) but are not identical to them. The dual meaning of force is important – both a form of coercive power and a group or entity which can wield that power. But, he asked, why had the relationship between force and power disappeared from contemporary discussions of power, which he found were often 'naïve'? And, critically, what of the most direct form of force, violence?

Here, then, we finally understand the inclusion of *War in European History* in the essay. Eco 'invite[s] the reader to dabble around in this fascinating book at their pleasure' exploring its 'dense anecdotes and unpredictable discoveries'. To illustrate his argument, Eco – a medievalist by training and inclination – drew on Howard's discussion of technology and tactics in the Hundred Years' War. The introduction of the longbow at Crécy led gradually but inexorably to the extinction of the armed medieval knight; a technological change, creating tactical change leading to social transformation. The impact of an arrow on a man on horseback is a relationship of force; soon a whole new power structure would emerge, accounting for a very different kind of army. New symbolic structures of power and domination – with new rhetorics and ideologies – were thus required to account for these new forces. Instead of Crécy, he might just as easily have illustrated this analysis with Howard's account of the effects of firepower as wielded by infantry, or of changing methods of siege warfare on urban structures, or indeed of nuclear strategy on international relations. Eco observed that 'Howard's book seems to proceed in the inverse way to Duby's: starting from force he proceeds, indirectly, to the new structures of power, whereas [Duby] moved from the formulation of the images of power to the relationship between old and new forces which underpinned it.'[50] His focus is the way Howard showed that changes in the relationship between military forces underpinned shifts in power dynamics (social, political and economic).

This insight is important because Eco focuses on an aspect of Howard's work which is easily lost in the generic embrace of a broadly-defined 'war and society' approach to the past. Eco argues that Howard constructs the relationship between force and social change as directional – a vector. Rather than war and society – or war and ideology – broadly and diffusely shaping one another, this reading suggests the use of force in war produces new social and economic structures and, ultimately, the new ideological or symbolic systems to justify and perpetuate them.

[49]Eco, 'La Lingua, Il Potere, La Forza', p. 461.
[50]Eco, p. 462.

In his essay, Eco rebuked Barthes for moving the discussion of power wholly into the linguistic sphere, eliding or ignoring the realities of force altogether. Discourse analysis should not float free from the use of force, which both underpinned and in key ways preceded it. The equivalent is perhaps that variant of the new military history which, in Hew Strachan's words, 'has seemed to be the history of war with the fighting left out'.[51] Dennis Showalter has written, 'This process can represent at least as dangerous a distortion of methods as did the previous limited emphasis on battles, sieges and historic tableaux.'[52] In a perhaps surprising pairing of intellects, Showalter and Eco agree it is essential to analyse force to understand power. That Showalter's warning was published as early as 1975 shows the extent to which military history without battle appeared to be emerging even then. Of course, as Strachan has noted, 'Michael [Howard]'s interest has been too firmly rooted in the phenomenon of war itself for this to have been an attractive route for him go down'.[53] Howard also presented the state's monopoly on the use of force as an essential building block of both the domestic and international order and indeed a necessary condition for the establishment of peace. Eco's observation that analysis of language, symbolism and ideology might lose touch with the concrete realities of force certainly foreshadows some of the debates about the new cultural histories of war in the 1990s and 2000s. His solution was not, of course, to abandon the study of symbols, rhetorical systems and ideology; rather he pushed for a deeper engagement with the interrelationship between the forms of power.

Power vs Force

Just what is the relationship between power and force? At times they have been used interchangeably, even in military history, but Eco is not alone is seeking to distinguish the concepts. American strategist Edward Luttwak offered an interesting definition in an appendix to his highly influential, if much debated, 1979 work, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire from the First Century A.D. to the Third.* This was a military history of imperial Rome, focusing exclusively on its peak, which offered an innovative and provocative take on the strategic thinking of the empire's successive rulers. To do so he offered his own working definitions of power and force, usefully summarised in a review essay on the topic by J C Mann. Luttwak defines Rome's power as 'the ability to enforce obedience, whether on provincials or on others, because the latter perceive that Rome has the means to enforce that obedience simply by the threat to

[51]Strachan, 'Michael Howard and the Dimensions of Military History'.
[52]Showalter, 'A Modest Plea for Drums and Trumpets', p. 72.
[53]Strachan, 'Michael Howard and the Dimensions of Military History', p. 545.

resort to arms'.[54] As Luttwak puts it, power 'elicits responses' from those subjected to it and is 'initially a subjective phenomenon' since it relies on their perceptions; people subjected to it comply because they *believe* that they must.[55] Force, by contrast, is an objective reality directly applied in combat (or through non-combat deployment). Power is not consumed by being wielded – in fact it may be strengthened; meanwhile force is consumed by being used. Power thus relies on force but also needs to conserve it, to deploy it cautiously: no state has unlimited forces nor can afford to waste them. So successful political control – and good strategy – is the ability to wield power while minimising the consumption of force, according to Luttwak.

This definition, coined in strategic terms, may bring us closer to Eco – and to a 'war and society' version of military history – than at first apparent. What makes people believe in, and comply with, the power of a state or regime? The objective reality of the force it can deploy, certainly; but also, the cultural scripts and social practices which encode, transmit and perpetuate the threat of that force. Of course, our ability to estimate the reality of a threat of force is often poor. History is rich with examples of unexpected collapses (of regimes or armies) based on a mismatch between the realities of deployable force and the rhetorics and ideologies around them. Following Luttwak, we need to do more to understand the relationship between (military) force and its cultural and social superstructures.

A history of war that obscures power dynamics and their ultimate reliance on force is deeply unsatisfactory, even paradoxical. During the centenary of the First World War, the wartime contribution of non-white and non-British soldiers to the British war effort began to be celebrated. In a praiseworthy effort to diversify the stories which are told and remembered about the war, many public history outlets began to focus on the experiences of Indian, Caribbean and African soldiers who fought and died for Britain. However, this sometimes slipped into a celebration of multicultural unity which conflated the Britain of 2014-2018 with that of a century before, completely obscuring the realities of imperial power and the brutal force which underpinned it. This ahistorical approach risks swallowing, hook, line and sinker, the wartime propagandistic framing of imperial unity in the name of modern inclusivity.[56] By restoring force to the picture we can more accurately understand the dynamics at play.

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[54]J. C. Mann, 'Power, Force and the Frontiers of the Empire', ed. Edward N. Luttwak, *The Journal of Roman Studies* 69 (1979): p. 176, https://doi.org/10.2307/299068. Accessed 30 June 2022.

[55]Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century CE to the Third,* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2016), pp. 224–26.

[56]I am grateful to Michael Joseph at Cambridge University for these observations.

Power, Force and Coercion

Eco's reading of *War in European History* can offer a useful framework through which to rethink some debates in the historiography of war. Beginning in the late 1990s, French historians of 1914-1918 became very engaged in the question of how and why soldiers endured the horrors of the Western Front: why did they fight on for so long? Why did relatively few desert or mutiny? Two approaches emerged in what has become known as the 'war cultures' debate. One group of historians, loosely associated with the research centre at the *Historial de la Grande Guerre* at Péronne, argued that a vigorous popular culture emerged which so demonised the enemy that soldiers consented to the violence of the war. The French people, in this account, were unified in feeling that they were engaged in an existential struggle against an implacable enemy. Soldiers' violence was justified and sustained by the meanings attributed to the war – which were themselves shaped by brutal violence.[57] A second group of historians, by contrast, has emphasised the intense forces of coercion and constraint to which soldiers were subjected. The disciplinary force which the military justice system brought to bear, along with the moral pressures of the wartime economy of sacrifice, gave soldiers little choice but to participate in the violence whatever their personal feelings. This argument was put forward by scholars linked to the *Collectif de Recherche International et de Débat sur la Guerre de 1914-1918* (CRID 14-18), founded in 2005.[58]

The debate over coercion and consent became, at times, polemical in tone; this has obscured the commonalities shared by the two sides. In reality, both interpretations drew on a similar conception of the history of war since both presented the experiences, beliefs and mentalities of ordinary soldiers as the defining feature of the war.[59] As a result, military technology, tactics, operations, strategy, generalship, command and logistics all faded almost entirely from the debate. In a sign of the total transformation of French history of war, we might call it the anti-*histoire bataille.* However, as Eco observed, a true understanding of the power which resides within systems of language and culture must grapple with the realities of *force,* not just violence. The deployment of the coercive force of the state is an essential part of the

[57]The foundational work here is Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18, retrouver la guerre,* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000).

[58]See, among others, Rémy Cazals and Frédéric Rousseau, *14-18, le cri d'une génération : la correspondance et les carnets intimes rédigés au front…,* (Toulouse: Privat, 2001); André Loez, *14-18, les refus de la guerre: une histoire des mutins,* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010).

[59]Pierre Purseigle, 'Controversy: War Culture', *1914-1918-Online International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, 2020, https://doi.org/10.15463/IE1418.11457. Accessed 30 June 2022.

wartime realities of power. To discuss the brutalising effects of violence, rather than force in a military sense, ignores Eco's insight that force is directional and embedded within a power relationship. The violence of the trenches is not, therefore, identical to force. At the same time, soldiers were not simply subjected to, or victims of, coercive force by the state. They were themselves agents of military force against the enemy; the rhetorical constructs of cultural power which emerged in wartime, so carefully analysed by the *Historial* scholars, therefore rested on *both* these bases.

Conclusions

The incorporation of social and cultural methodologies and concerns into French and Italian military history has become the norm since *War in European History* was published; in other respects, less has changed. Despite the rise of global history, military history is still overwhelmingly focused on the West, and the end of the Cold War has done little to end Eurocentrism. Military history has certainly opened up towards imperial history in recent years, which is sometimes used as a lazy short-hand for global history. But despite some promising recent signs, a truly global military history is still to fully emerge in European or North American academia. Howard's focus on European history might seem outdated but it is actually much closer to the contemporary approach than some would like to admit.

Reading *War in European History* today one is struck by its scope, ambition, and successful synthesis. By taking a very long view, Howard was able to construct a nuanced and original argument without sacrificing clarity. While some of his peers wrote comparable works in that era, such scholarly syntheses are fewer on the ground today (perhaps owing to contemporary professional pressures which have driven ever greater specialisation). In France and in Italy, the response has been to create ambitious multivolume collaborative histories spanning multiple periods.[60] Nonetheless, these still adopt a national framework, not a European – let alone global – perspective. But just as the turn to global history encourages us to turn our attentions beyond narrow geographical confines, Howard's effort to grapple with big problems outside his own chief period of interest, the better to illuminate his main focus, should remind us that expanded chronologies are also a way to push the boundaries of scholarship. The periodical *Alfabeta* which published Umberto Eco's essay on language, power and force set out, in its opening editorial, a plea not just for reading but for re-reading; for continuing to read and to think about old books, not just new ones, and to address current problems in the light of earlier ideas as well as

[60]André Corvisier, *Histoire Militaire de La France*, 4 vols (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1992); Herve Drévillon and Olivier Wieviorka, *Histoire militaire de la France* (Paris: Perrin : Ministère des Armées, 2018); *Gli italiani in guerra : conflitti, identità, memorie dal Risorgimento ai nostri giorni*, 7 vols (Turin: UTET, 2008).

applying new frameworks to old problems. In that spirit, may we long continue to re-read the classics of military history.