

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

---

Volume 21  
Number 1 *Parameters* 1991

Article 25

---

7-4-1991

## THE NEW MILITARY HISTORY

Peter Paret

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

---

### Recommended Citation

Peter Paret, "THE NEW MILITARY HISTORY," *Parameters* 21, no. 1 (1991), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.1606.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

# The New Military History

PETER PARET

© 1991 Peter Paret

In recent years the “New Military History” has been much talked about by students of the history of war, but there seems to be no general agreement on the meaning of the term. Various definitions and characterizations have appeared in print; frequent among them is the assertion or suggestion that whatever else it may stand for, the New Military History minimizes or even excludes the subject of combat. If that gives far too much weight to the orientation of some among the many adherents of the new, it is nevertheless a useful starting point for a discussion of what the New Military History has achieved so far and what it may mean to the study of war. I am not, however, suggesting that we replace the vagueness attached to the term with a precise definition. History is an exact science only in part: narrow definitions are often misleading, and in this particular case a broad generalization, which can encompass different positions, may come closer to reality.

Most military historians and others conversant with the discipline would probably agree that the New Military History refers to a partial turning away from the great captains, and from weapons, tactics, and operations as the main concerns of the historical study of war. Instead we are asked to pay greater attention to the interaction of war with society, economics, politics, and culture. The New Military History stands for an effort to integrate the study of military institutions and their actions more closely with other kinds of history.

This broad general movement includes a variety of specific approaches, which are not necessarily in agreement with one another. Some are defined by methodological interests—the application of social-science techniques is often mentioned. Others by ideological points of view—for instance, interpretations patterned by the dogma of one or the other kind of Marxism, neo-Marxism, or—to be quite up to date—humanistic Marxism. Others again are defined by their subject matter: the condition of the common soldier, for

one; or—at the opposite end of the scale—the role of military institutions in the creation and maintenance of state power. These countless approaches are more or less closely related to the application of force, but tend to go beyond it. The New Military History asserts that the history of war is about much more than people killing each other, and that it should look beyond the actual realization, the putting into practice, of man's organized inhumanity to man.

I have outlined a broad characterization of the term; let me now suggest that we might draw three preliminary conclusions from it. First, despite the contradictions and sometimes exaggerations associated with the New Military History, it does represent a tendency, a change in emphasis in research and writing that is important and that many will welcome. Second, the word "new" in the New Military History is inaccurate if it is used in an absolute sense to signify something that did not exist before. In this context I would guess that few people would take the word literally, but there can be no doubt that its use carries and is meant to carry powerful connotations. I hardly need add that by now even the label "The New Military History" has been with us for some time: at least since the late 1960s, and in slightly different formulations since the Second World War. And finally, the New Military History is obviously related to other more or less recent developments in our discipline: the New Cultural History, the New Narrative History, and the grandfather of all the new histories since the Second World War, the New Social History. We need to look more closely at each of these points. Let me begin with the first, the positive changes that the New Military History represents.

**B**ecause wars, the institutions that make them possible, and the ideas that guide their conduct form an important part of human experience, they ought to be a principal subject of historical study. But, as we know, their significance has not often been fully reflected in historical scholarship, and has been even less in evidence in the ways history is organized as a discipline and

---

After teaching at Stanford for 17 years, Dr. Peter Paret came to the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in 1986, where he holds the Andrew W. Mellon Chair in the Humanities. Professor Paret has written extensively on the history of art and culture and on the history of war. Among his books in the latter field are *Yorck and the Era of Prussian Reform* and *Clausewitz and the State*, which has now been translated into German, Spanish, and Japanese. He is the editor of the new version of *Makers of Modern Strategy* and with Michael Howard translated and edited Clausewitz's *On War*. With his former student Daniel Moran he has edited a companion volume to *On War*, *Clausewitz's Historical and Political Writings*, which Princeton University Press will publish this fall. In 1992 he will bring out two further books, a volume of his essays on the history of war and *Politicians and Patriots*, a work on posters in modern history, which he wrote and edited with Beth Irwin Lewis and with his son Paul. The present article was adapted from Professor Paret's lecture, "The New Military History: An Appreciation and a Critique," delivered at the annual meeting of the American Military Institute in Durham, N.C., on 22 March 1991.

---

as a profession. That derivative, sensational accounts of battle form the mainstay of popular history does nothing to alter this fact but only brings it out more clearly. In American colleges and universities, military history has led something of a marginal existence, and it has not fared much better elsewhere.

If the study of war has never been a major field of academic specialization, it is for reasons that are embedded in the development of history as a scholarly discipline over the past two centuries. Let me mention a few. By and large, academics have considered war as something exceptional, a crisis—perhaps even a perversion—of the ordinary political and foreign policy processes, and therefore not suited to constitute one of the units into which we organize research and teaching. War is also a subject that cannot easily be understood from the outside. Its study may demand technical expertise of a kind difficult for the civilian scholar to acquire.

Of course there are certain historians who tend to be thoroughly familiar with technical and organizational aspects of war, and who also enjoy preferred access to masses of relevant documents—the official service historians. But frequently these historians have provided their peers in colleges and universities with yet another reason for dismissing military history. Official history is written to provide a record, to fix the past firmly in our consciousness, but often also to lay bare the lessons for today and tomorrow that the past is thought to offer. Some years ago, in a stimulating discussion of the American military tradition, Don Higginbotham wrote that soldiers believe “history to be relevant. To study a famous battle is to simulate combat, to give officers a vivid sense of being present, of engaging vicariously in a meaningful tactical exercise.”<sup>1</sup> This is not how most historians of nonmilitary subjects think of their work. Certainly historians disagree on the purposes of history, and I suspect that fewer than one might wish hold the purist position that they study the past simply to try to understand it—never mind its so-called lessons, which often are nothing but the impositions of our current concerns on what has gone before. But although no unanimity exists on this matter, few historians would teach a course or write a book on the French Revolution, for example, or on McKinley’s presidential campaign, and conclude with a list of lessons learned. The utilitarian spirit, the belief in relevance, seems to be more pronounced in official histories, and it certainly has dominated the courses taught in ROTC programs, which for many college teachers have represented military history as such.

These are general observations. Let me move on to the situation of military history in this country in the 1950s and 60s. The Second World War and the conflicts that followed had given a boost to the study of military history, and some of the books and articles that now appeared were of high quality. But on the whole this literature did not take a broad view of its subject. At the same time, a great many professional historians ignored or looked with

suspicion on military history—either because they were busy with their own concerns, or out of ignorance, or even from political or ideological motives, which the war in Vietnam was to strengthen further. In 1954 a survey of 493 colleges and universities showed that no more than 37 institutions—seven and one half percent of the total—offered or planned to offer one or occasionally two courses in military history.<sup>2</sup> Graduate study and tenure-track appointments were similarly limited. If it hadn't been for a small number of scholars such as Theodore Ropp at Duke, Robin Higham at Kansas State, or the historians associated with the undergraduate program in the history of military affairs at Princeton, the history of war would hardly have had a continuous institutional presence in American higher education.

At the time, historians who chose to study war had to fight on two fronts: against the indifference or hostility of most of their colleagues on the one hand, and against the narrowness of much of military history on the other. They insisted on the importance of studying and teaching the history of war while simultaneously arguing that it was made up of more than unit histories, narratives of battles and campaigns, and biographies of victorious generals. In 1966 one of these historians (and I hope I may be permitted to quote myself) took note of the prejudice against military history, but continued that “much of it [is] caused by the inadequacies of the military historians themselves. Is there another field of historical research,” he asked, “whose practitioners are equally parochial, are as poorly informed on the work of their foreign colleagues . . . and show as little concern about the theoretical innovations and disputes that today are transforming the study and writing of history?”<sup>3</sup> We may disagree on the specifics of this observation, but its general point was accepted by many historians who were not interested in military history and at least by some who were.

Of the scholars whose work is today grouped under the rubric of the New Military History, some reacted against these conditions. Others were never victimized by them and followed their own agenda from the start. Because of the paths they chose, and also because ideas and attitudes in our discipline have not remained static—a matter to which I shall return—the situation of the history of war has changed in the past decade, and changed for the better. Many more good books and articles are appearing in the field.

---

*In American colleges and universities,  
military history has led something  
of a marginal existence . . .*

---

To return to my earlier characterization of the New Military History, let me rephrase it in more concise and inclusive form—one that I hope we can all accept: the New Military History as it is currently written signifies an expansion of the subject of military history from the specifics of military organization and action to their widest implications, and also a broadening of the approaches to the subject, of the methodologies employed. In consequence the former isolation of military history within history has diminished; now interchanges of ideas are more frequent, an opening up that is also reflected in an increase in interdisciplinary approaches and topics.

Even some of the more traditional military historians have been led to broaden their focus, and official programs have become more sophisticated and comprehensive. History departments may be showing a greater readiness to recognize the validity, even the necessity, of studying military thought, institutions, and policy in the past. I have not seen a recent survey of graduate and undergraduate courses in the field, but have the impression that their number is growing—if often under the guise of “peace studies,” a distorting label that signals how much of the old prejudice and failure to understand is still with us. Finally, academic positions in the field appear to be increasing somewhat, and a new Ph.D. who can point to a minor in military history may now seem a more attractive candidate to a greater number of search committees. These are no more than modest changes, but compared to the way things used to be they signify an advance. They have helped create greater academic openness, have themselves benefited from it, and are enriching the study and teaching of history across the country—not just the history of war, but history in general.

These are welcome developments. But not surprisingly some weaknesses are associated with them. One is the danger that in the urge to link up with other kinds of history, military history loses its orientation on the central issue: armed forces and armed conflict. In itself that is nothing new. Thirty years ago, Walter Millis’s pamphlet *Military History*, which was sponsored and published by the American Historical Association and thus carried a certain institutional authority, recommended that to survive in this country, military history should become less military and more civilian. Whether the escape from war was a useful option for military history at the time, or is today, seems very questionable. But it must be emphasized again that the turning away from combat is by no means a general phenomenon of the New Military History.

Another weakness relates to the assertion that the New Military History is new. Labels—like advertising slogans in general—should not be taken too seriously, and if in recent years some historians or their editors have pushed the word “new” to emphasize the supposedly innovative quality of their work, we can accept this as one of the exaggerations that are not

uncommon in the world of publishing. Still, the manipulative or naive use of "new" may convey a mistaken and highly unprofessional sense of what military history has and has not achieved so far. In responding to the claim of newness, two propositions might be put forward. First, the New Military History has not yet achieved a true methodological breakthrough. Its methods were developed by others long ago. Second, the New Military History has not yet been able to equal certain works written generations ago, which if they were written today would certainly be considered part of the new wave. Put differently, the New Military History is a continuation, in some cases perhaps an expansion, of what has gone before.

I feel free to say this because contemporary military historians who reflect on their field of research will have no difficulty whatever in identifying historians writing 30 or 50 years ago, or even earlier, who took the broad, integrative view of their subject that is the core around which the New Military History has coalesced. In reviewing our predecessors we must of course guard against being misled by the different, perhaps old-fashioned styles and terminologies some may have used. It is possible to write innovative history in traditional language, just as it is possible to express third-rate, derivative ideas in the most up-to-date, fashionable terms.

Rather than offering up a lengthy survey of the names of scholars within the past century whose work falls within the boundaries of the New Military History, let me mention just three historians of the preceding generation who interpreted the American military experience in a modern, innovative manner: William Willcox, T. Harry Williams, and Frank Craven. In 1959, when Craven gave the first Harmon Memorial Lecture at the US Air Force Academy, he noted that after the Second World War, "many historians came to take a broader view of military history, a view for which we may owe some debt to the historians of the pre-war era." He continued, "We recognize that the battle itself is no more than a part of the story. The central problem is man's continuing dependence on force as an instrument of policy, and we have come to see that every aspect of his social, economic, and political order . . . is pertinent to military history." What Craven wrote 32 years ago still holds true today, although we might feel compelled to rephrase his statement in non-gender-specific terms.<sup>4</sup>

I am certainly not suggesting that these scholars said all there is to be said. Historians writing today—who of course benefit from that earlier work—often go beyond it, find new material, formulate new problems, even achieve methodological refinements. Reinterpretation, if based on genuine understanding and an open acknowledgment of what has gone before, is one of the glories of the discipline of history. But many of these earlier scholars remain remarkably, admirably contemporary, and to greater or lesser degree each asks questions and uses approaches by which the New Military History

is identified. They are our ancestors; and as is the habit of rich relatives, they stubbornly refuse to die.

**A**n example of the many bonds that bind together the Old and the New Military History is the presence of social history in each. Of course, social history itself is not unchanging; it comprises a variety of orientations and methods, and in recent years studies of the common people and the rank and file have undoubtedly played a much larger role than they did two generations ago, although they existed even then. Nevertheless, in the minds of many of its adherents—readers as well as writers—the New Military History is associated with studies that concentrate on history from below. That would suggest links with the New Social History, which brings up the interesting question of the relationship between the New Military History and recent developments in the discipline of history as a whole.

It is probably no accident that the New Military History is merely one among several kinds of historical study that in recent years have emerged as “new.” These so-called new forms have several roots. They emerged in reaction to earlier conditions, and to the extent that they respond to new issues and questions they are products of scholarly development and change. They are also stimulated by intellectual developments elsewhere—that is, they are not only the outcome of a linear process but also of interdisciplinary changes. And as they grow they support each other. They borrow the concept of newness from each other, and soon present a front of the new against tradition and convention, a front that is made up of mutual sympathies and scholarly borrowings, with the result, as I noted above, that the old isolation of military history has diminished.

In this development, the New Social History has played an ambiguous role. By transmitting to other fields its faith in social science methods and its belief in the importance of studying the conditions and attitudes of the mass of the population, it has influenced the New Military History. But if we think back on the 1960s and 70s, we will find that attitudes associated with or engendered by the New Social History strongly contributed to the hostile environment in which military history then existed.

Opposition to the historical study of war—which is not the same as indifference to it—has often been driven by political attitudes, the same attitudes that were one of the forces—and I stress, only one among several—that lent impetus to the New Social History: a critique by the left of American capitalism; of inequities of class, race, and gender; of the cold war, often interpreted as an expression of American imperialism—all intensified by the opposition to the war in Vietnam. These political elements not only helped energize the New Social History, they fostered a certain intolerance in some of its followers. Some areas of study were dismissed as unimportant or even pernicious—among them military history—and efforts were made to impose



---

*Opposition to the historical study of war  
has often been driven by  
political attitudes.*

---

standards of thematic and methodological correctness on our unruly discipline. Of course these efforts did not succeed, but they had an impact. In his essay "The Influence of Air Power upon Historians," Noel Parrish recalls a session during the 1977 meetings of the American Historical Association at which two young professors announced that "history is not history unless it has social significance."<sup>5</sup> That degree of silliness was rare, but the statement does point to an attitude that in diluted form was widespread for a time. It gained further strength when a market factor kicked in, and graduate students and junior faculty on the hunt for jobs, grants, and tenure felt pressed to present their work in a certain manner. When fashions changed and the domination of the New Social History faded, many people, especially those just beginning their careers, were left poorly prepared for finding their way through the newly fragmented, more challenging academic landscape.

This phase in the recent history of the discipline is worth recalling not only for its ironic twist by which the New Military History became indebted to the very force that had doubted the scholarly legitimacy of studying war, but also as a cautionary tale. It tells us how people get hurt when mutual tolerance and the acceptance of many varieties of history are rejected in favor of a homogeneous, uniform standard: this is how history should be written if you want to be published, promoted, if you want recognition. And, to repeat, it is particularly beginners, in their precarious psychological and professional condition, who are victimized by the threat and promise of the absolute.

Let me conclude by returning to the New Military History, which I have tried to suggest cannot well be discussed in isolation from the Old. We share these present ruminations in the aftermath of war, of a military victory of considerable magnitude, which will leave a deep mark on our society, and eventually and to lesser degree on the writing and teaching of history, including the history of war. The Gulf War of 1990-91 is a particularly clear example of an interaction that is basic to all armed conflict, the interaction of society, politics, policy, armed forces, and the threat and use of violence. It will be difficult to write the history of this war from a purely military perspective—I am not saying there won't be such histories, for surely there will be many of them, but they will leave out much that is of basic importance, without which

the planning and fighting will make little sense. They will not be true histories. The Gulf War is the perfect subject for the New Military History—and for its many adherents going back to Clausewitz, who in 1827 wrote that “there can be no purely military evaluation of a great strategic issue, nor . . . a purely military scheme to solve it.”<sup>6</sup> The history of the Gulf War will have to take account of all the factors I have mentioned and many others besides, weaving them together in a way that recreates and makes comprehensible the dynamics of the conflict. There will also be hundreds of studies on parts of this great subject: the role of African-Americans, the role of women, the issue of the Scud missiles, the history of reporting the war, and so on. But also the history of the 101st Airborne Division’s air assault, the account of the armored fight at Kuwait International Airport, the biography of a pilot, of a prisoner of war, of General Norman Schwarzkopf—and all these themes, whether conventional or less so, are valid and need to be studied and interpreted.

What I have just said may be rephrased in more general terms: Anyone is free to reject a particular subject as dull and a particular approach as unproductive. What we should not do is to inflate our likes and dislikes into cosmic law. In the final analysis, the only thing that matters in history—whether the New or the Old—is quality. An intelligently written unit history is better than a poorly designed and badly executed interdisciplinary study even if it is decorated with the latest methodology.

There is little that we who care about the discipline of military history can do collectively or institutionally to foster quality. Good history is not created by organizations. Only the individual scholar’s talent and energy can bring it about. But singly each of us can do a great deal—with our colleagues, our students, and in our own work—by ejecting ideology from scholarship, by treating fashion, careerism, and methodological factionalism with the contempt they deserve, and by insisting on the intellectual openness that gives all of us a chance to do our best.

#### NOTES

1. Don Higginbotham, “George Washington and George Marshall: Some Reflections on the American Military Tradition,” in *The Harmon Memorial Lectures in Military History, 1959-1987*, ed. Harry R. Borowski (Washington: GPO, 1988), p. 157.

2. According to a study by Richard C. Brown for the US Air Force Historical Division, cited in Louis Morton, “The Historian and the Study of War,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 48 (March 1962), 601.

3. Peter Paret, “Hans Delbrück on Military Critics and Military Historians,” in *Military Affairs*, 30 (Fall 1966), 148.

4. W. Frank Craven, “Why Military History,” in *The Harmon Memorial Lectures*, p. 12. Readers interested in the names of some of the scholars of European military history whom I regard as early practitioners of the New Military History will find them mentioned in my article “The History of War,” in *Daedalus*, 100 (Spring 1971), 376-80. For a more recent discussion, see the concluding section of my article “Military Power,” *The Journal of Military History*, 53 (July 1989), 254-56.

5. Noel F. Parrish, “The Influence of Airpower upon Historians,” in *The Harmon Memorial Lectures*, p. 28.

6. Carl von Clausewitz, *Two Letters on Strategy*, ed. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, 1984), p. 9.