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Captains of War

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Louis Halewood and David Morgan-Owen

This article examines the role of history in Professional Military Education (PME) in light of the recent United States Joint Chiefs of Staff's guidance on achieving 'intellectual overmatch'. It argues that a narrow approach to the past, underpinned by preconceived notions of 'relevance', undermines what ability history has to serve the aims of military education. History need not be 'applied' to make it valuable, as its study can provide a broader understanding of warfare. Only by treating history more seriously, and by meaningfully engaging with the legacies of Britain's own military past, can the discipline contribute to modern PME.

In their new guidance on reforming US professional military education (PME) for the 21st century, the Joint Chiefs of Staff laid out a wide-ranging manifesto with an unambiguous goal: to achieve 'intellectual overmatch'. Their instructions have prompted a wealth of commentary from within PME, the military and the broader academic community.¹ Part of this discourse has focused on the issue of methodology, and specifically what the Joint Chiefs had to say about history. In a section of the guidance concerned with keeping educational methodologies up to date with cutting edge 'active and experiential learning', they noted that such approaches 'include use of case studies grounded in history to help students develop judgment, analysis, and problem-solving skills, which can then be applied to contemporary challenges'. Deepening students' knowledge of history is listed as a means of accomplishing one of the report's 'critical tasks', that of adapting and innovating US PME.²

On first inspection, this might come as welcome news to the historical profession – especially in the context of the widespread financial uncertainty afflicting higher education in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, and the broader context of declining student enrolments in History courses in the US.³ At the same time, the guidance revives a series of long-running

The authors would like to thank Aimée Fox, Huw Bennett, Francesco Milan, Anna Brinkman, and Chris Tripodi for their comments on drafts of this article.

¹ See *War on the Rocks*, 'Educating the Force', <<https://warontherocks.com/category/special-series/educating-the-force/>>, accessed 19 June 2020.

² Joint Chiefs of Staff, 'Developing Today's Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War', 1 May 2020, <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/education/jcs_pme_tm_vision.pdf?ver=2020-05-15-102429-817>, accessed 29 May 2020.

³ Julia Brookins, 'Enrollment Declines Continue', *Perspectives on History*, 12 February 2018, <<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/february-2018/enrollment-declines-continue-aha-survey-again-shows-fewer-undergraduates-in-history-courses>>, accessed 16 June 2020.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *The RUSI Journal* accepted on 21st December 2020 and published online on 2nd February 2021, available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03071847.2021.1876526> and well-rehearsed debates about ‘learning’ from history, the use of historical case studies, and the instrumentalisation of the past in pursuit of ‘usable’ deductions or ‘lessons’ which might inform US military ‘overmatch’ in future.⁴ Doubtless the Joint Chiefs did not have these concerns foremost in their minds when they issued their guidance, which is much more concerned with PME reform than it is with what history officers may or may not read. Yet, it is important to appreciate the practical implications which a shift to using historical case studies as a vehicle to think about the present may have. In important respects, the methodology behind this approach is *not* history, or at least not as historians understand it. This article explores some of the methodological and conceptual implications which stem from the new PME guidance, and examines what implications it may have for British military education in the 21st century.

Mobilising History: Problems of Presentism and Instrumentalisation

The nature of the relationship between past, present and future is a central question of historical enquiry. Across space and time, societies have developed what François Hartog has described as ‘regimes of historicity’ – particular shared understandings of the links (or lack thereof) between historical time and the contemporary world.⁵ This dialogue between past and present has been central to the history of warfare since the earliest days of the discipline, in large part owing to that subject’s enduring relationship with the practice of military education. As the Joint Chiefs’ memo underlined, PME prizes the ‘utility’ of history as a means to better understanding current and future conflict. Much early military history was written by serving or retired officers, specifically with the requirements of military education in mind. A preoccupation with the concerns of the present, allied to a lack of professional training, meant that the work they produced was viewed with suspicion and scepticism by the historical profession at large.⁶ Methodologically bankrupt and politically suspect, military history thus struggled to gain a solid footing within universities for much of its early existence, and was often (with important exceptions such as Hans Delbrück) confined to relatively narrow

⁴ The classic intervention in this debate is Michael Howard, ‘The Use and Abuse of Military History’, *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 107, No. 625, 1962), pp. 4–10.

⁵ François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and the Experiences of Time*, translated by Saskia Brown (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015).

⁶ David French, “‘Official but not History’”? Sir James Edmonds and the Official History of the Great War’, *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 131, No. 1, 1986), pp. 58–63; A D Lambert, ‘The Construction of Naval History 1815–1914’, *The Mariner’s Mirror* (Vol. 97, No. 1, 2011), pp. 207–24.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *The RUSI Journal* accepted on 21st December 2020 and published online on 2nd February 2021, available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03071847.2021.1876526> questions of tactics and operations – sometimes dismissed as so-called ‘drums and trumpets’, or ‘operational’ military history.⁷

This depiction of the early years of military history is no longer relevant to the study of war today. We are well served by a vibrant scholarly community which examines conflict in a more holistic, diverse and critical manner than ever before, asking new questions and adopting fresh perspectives. The laments of those who depict ‘traditional’ forms of military and political history as being under threat in modern universities are thus easily overhyped (although they do have a basis in reality).⁸ Nevertheless, a potent and credible critique over the ‘use’ or ‘instrumentalisation’ of history in the study of war remains, and has yet to be fully reflected in debates over the position of history within PME. In some respects, this reflects the disciplinary marginalisation of history from our understanding of warfare and strategy since 1945. Historians have become less involved in debates over the nature of war, although those debates have continued in their absence, and the past has frequently been ‘used’ by scholars of strategic studies and other disciplines with little reference to how historians themselves conceive of war. In other ways, as shall be explored, the treatment of history within PME speaks to competing foundational assumptions about the nature of war, and how we go about studying it.

The evolution of ‘traditional’ military history into a more holistic, scholarly approach to the study of war as a phenomenon can be traced back to Clausewitz, and forward through figures such as John Knox Laughton, Julian Corbett and Delbrück. Yet, the towering influence of the late Sir Michael Howard, founder of the War Studies Department at King’s College London, was central to the attempt to organise an academic discipline around the study of war. Howard’s inspiration in establishing ‘war studies’ as an academic discipline was Clausewitzian: as wars were sufficiently unlike any other aspect of human activity, they retained an essential similarity which made war itself a useful category of analysis across time and space. However, despite Howard’s injunction to approach war in its broadest sense in order to understand its central essence, the field he established – much as ‘military history’ before it – can still be seen to lack central disciplinary agreement on the essential nature of war. As Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton have argued, despite the great wealth of sophisticated scholarship related to war and to the military, ‘war studies’ continues to lack a central

⁷ Michael Howard, ‘Military History and the History of War’, in Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich (eds), *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 12–20.

⁸ Michael Finch, ‘Always a Marginal Pursuit? Academic Military History in the Twentieth Century’, paper delivered at King’s College London, June 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w41mE7V_KIA>, accessed 10 June 2020.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *The RUSI Journal* accepted on 21st December 2020 and published online on 2nd February 2021, available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03071847.2021.1876526> disciplinary *object*. Despite being unified under the ‘war studies’ banner, war is overwhelmingly studied with reference to society, economy, government or diplomacy, rather than as the central phenomena in its own right. When war is situated as the object of study, such as in areas of strategic studies, the same imperatives of ‘utility’ and ‘relevance’ which shaped early military history remain in evidence. The result, as Barkawi and Brighton have argued, is that much of our knowledge about war has yet to escape fully from analytical imperatives related to the conduct of fighting by organised (usually Western) militaries. Thus, even if ‘war studies’ has produced a more sophisticated and scholarly approach to the study of warfighting, and related ‘war and society’ approaches have illuminated the social, economic and cultural implications of conflict, the absence of a unifying disciplinary object has stymied the discussion of war as a phenomenon. As a result, we know much more about fighting than we do about the nature of war, with all of its transformative political and social implications.⁹

If the history of conflict is understood primarily as the history of fighting, we risk reinforcing this same disconnect. Yet, whether in terms of intent or implementation, the Joint Chiefs’ injunction to exploit the educational benefits of historical case studies risks unconsciously sliding into this tradition of thought. Abstracting specific campaigns or operations from their context and employing them as a means to service educational aims focused on the conduct of future war involves significant methodological and ontological assumptions about the nature of war and the nature of knowledge about war, both historic and contemporary. Indeed, purposefully understanding war in terms of instrumental knowledge about *fighting*, without considering its broader societal and political impacts, risks entrenching some of the questionable assumptions made within Western military thought in recent decades. In particular, it risks depicting war as somehow separate from politics, as a unique sphere of military expertise and judgement. As the post-9/11 wars have shown, such an approach risks fundamentally undermining the effective formation of strategy by firewalling military activity into a ‘policy-free zone’, thereby unhinging the dynamic relationship between conflict, policy and military force.¹⁰

⁹ Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton, ‘Powers of War: Fighting, Knowledge, and Critique’, *International Political Sociology* (Vol. 5, No. 2, 2011), p. 135; Kim A Wagner, ‘Seeing Like a Soldier: The Amritsar Massacre and the Politics of Military History’, in Martin Thomas and Gareth Curless (eds), *Decolonization and Conflict: Colonial Comparisons and Legacies* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), pp. 23–28; Howard, ‘Military History and the History of War’.

¹⁰ Hew Strachan, ‘Strategy and the Operational Level of War’, in Hew Strachan (ed.), *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 210–34.

This tension speaks to a series of long-running debates within PME regarding the utility and purpose of formal educational interventions for members of the armed forces. Divisions persist over the relative merits of education and training, whether PME should focus on tactics and operations or issues of strategy, or whether history of any kind remains ‘relevant’ to the wars of tomorrow.¹¹ Instrumentalisation, often expressed in the language of ‘relevance’, ‘applicability’ or ‘warfighting’, is central to this discussion, and has been almost throughout the history of organised PME.¹² As Bernard Brodie reflected ruefully in 1949, ‘soldiers usually are close students of tactics, but only rarely are they students of strategy and practically never of war’.¹³ On the other side, there are those who cleave to the view that formal PME should be directly related to specific military tasks and processes, and that an outsized focus on seemingly abstract discussions of war as a phenomenon are of little utility to most officers. One critic of British command and staff training lamented in 2015 how officers emerging from the system were ‘simply not as thoroughly trained in operational staff work as they used to be’ and that ‘professional training should not be infected by academic distractions’.¹⁴ Paula Thornhill made similar points in a critique of the US PME system in the summer of 2018, when she argued that ‘military and academic accreditation criteria produce generic, unfocused strategic studies curricula that fail to provide specific skills the military needs’. In her view, ‘the greatest challenge to implementing curricula changes could come from civilian-dominated ... graduate-level professional military education faculties’.¹⁵ The analogue between this debate over the purpose of military education and our discussion of the role of history is clear: narrowly defined case studies of particular operations or wars veer towards the requirements of training, rather than encouraging students to explore the nature of war itself.

In some respects, the Joint Chiefs’ memo marked a refreshing shift in this regard, as it erred towards the side of education, aiming to use history to ‘help students develop judgement, analysis, and problem-solving skills’.¹⁶ They thereby place stress not on exploiting the past to produce specific forms of usable knowledge about tactics or operations, but on history as a tool of intellectual development. Yet, the memo still stopped short of articulating a rarely spoken truth of PME: that a narrow focus on specific examples of warfighting abstracted from their

¹¹ David Jordan et al., *Understanding Modern Warfare*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 24–26.

¹² Aimée Fox, ‘Goats Mingling with Sheep? Professionalisation, Personalities, and Partnerships Between British Civil and Military Engineers, c.1887–1939’, *War & Society* (Vol. 38, No. 4, 2019), pp. 268–85.

¹³ Quoted in Jordan et al., *Understanding Modern Warfare*, p. 25.

¹⁴ Jim Storr, letter to the editor, *British Army Review* (Vol. 163, Spring/Summer 2015), pp. 126–27.

¹⁵ Paula Thornhill, ‘To Produce Strategists, Focus on Staffing Senior Leaders’, *War on the Rocks*, 20 July 2018.

¹⁶ Joint Chiefs of Staff, ‘Developing Today’s Joint Officers for Tomorrow’s Ways of War’, p. 6.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *The RUSI Journal* accepted on 21st December 2020 and published online on 2nd February 2021, available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03071847.2021.1876526> context does little for students' broader intellectual development, or their comprehension of war in its fullest sense. If history is to have value in PME, it must remain connected to the philosophical basis of the historical discipline and encourage students to engage with the complex nature of war itself. Reflecting on his own experience in British naval education before the First World War, Julian Corbett encapsulated this distinction:

[T]he scepticism as to the practical value of historical study which formerly existed in the Services – and especially in the Naval Service – was mainly due to unsound method. The common procedure was that men, who from their own practical experience had convinced themselves that some particular method of means of conducting war should be adopted, were accustomed to go to such history as was available for facts to demonstrate their preconceived opinion. Their opponents met them with a similar selection of facts, and the inevitable result was a sceptical feeling that history like statistics could prove anything, and with practical men history was brought into contempt. That method has now passed away, under the influence of more philosophical methods, and officers no longer look upon history as a kind of dust heap from which a convenient brick may be extracted to hurl at their opponents. They no longer go to it to prove some empirical view of tactics or material, or to show that some battle or other was fought in the way they think it ought to have been fought. They go to it as a mine of experience where alone the gold is to be found, from where right doctrine – the soul of warfare – can be built up.¹⁷

Corbett explained that the more distant past could provide broader insights into war more generally, while studying recent conflicts could provide insights for future wars. Yet, it was vital to recognise that what worked in certain specific contexts previously would not necessarily apply so readily to the present.¹⁸ Ultimately, Corbett argued against a simplistic reading of the past, in which reductive assumptions were used as evidence to support contemporary concerns. At the same time, he held that history retains an enduring relevance and connection to the present. These two propositions are not antagonistic and – if approached

¹⁷ Julian Stafford Corbett, *Naval and Military Essays: Being Papers Read in the Naval and Military Section at the International Congress of Historical Studies, 1913* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), pp. 23–24.

¹⁸ Andrew Lambert (ed.), *21st Century Corbett: Maritime Strategy and Naval Policy for the Modern Era* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017).

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Case Studies and the Construction of Knowledge About War

Having discussed the place of history in PME in general terms, it is worthwhile highlighting some specific and tangible challenges and opportunities of the ‘case study’ method outlined in the Joint Chiefs’ memo. First and foremost is the tension between the laudable aims it describes, and the language it uses around case studies. On the one hand, the document aims to ‘shift our PME curricula from a predominately topic-based model to an outcomes-based approach’ – implying a recognition that the results of education are more important than the specific route taken to achieve them. The memo also recommends resourcing ‘a library of case studies, colloquia, games, and exercises for use across the PME enterprise and [incentivising] collaboration and synergy between schools’ – thereby hinting at the need for common courseware and approaches.¹⁹ This notion of shared examples begs the obvious, yet highly loaded, question: case studies of what? And selected by whom?

If we conceive of ‘relevant’ historical case studies as being those with practical utility for 21st century, high-intensity *warfighting* against ‘peer’ rivals – which both the US and UK armed forces are reorientating towards – we automatically apply an arbitrary selection process on the past with potentially highly significant educational consequences. How often will such a selection process lead to the use of case studies drawn from outside of the 20th century, the Anglosphere, or of American or European military history? If ‘relevance’ is determined by a case study’s recognisable relationship to the present, then the answer to this question must be ‘rarely’. History which does not obviously conform to preconceived ideas of what modern or future war may look like are thus unlikely to find favour. Understood in such a fashion, the history of conflict risks being reduced to a small handful of 20th century campaigns and conflicts, centred on the Western experience. Seeking to develop knowledge about the nature of war from such a narrow series of examples has potentially significant and misleading consequences. As Barkawi has argued, this understanding of ‘relevance’ implies that ‘real war is interstate war between nation-states, fought between regular armed forces. All other conflicts are relegated to derivative categories’.²⁰ The long historical experience of warfare outside of these narrowly defined parameters is thus marginalised, despite the declining incidence of

¹⁹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, ‘Developing Today’s Joint Officers for Tomorrow’s Ways of War’, pp. 5–6.

²⁰ Tarak Barkawi, ‘Decolonising War’, *European Journal of International Security* (Vol. 1, No. 2, July 2016), p. 199.

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The discourse of ‘relevance’ in PME offers further, more fundamental, challenges to the appropriate role of history within the curriculum. Any process of case study selection will bring the past into conversation with the discussion of what is ‘relevant’ to educating members of the armed forces to face the conflicts of tomorrow. Here, the Joint Chiefs cleave to the frequently cited belief that ‘the profound and rapidly changing character of war and conflict in the 21st century compels us to transform’.²¹ This begs fundamental questions about the value of history to the comprehension of 21st century conflict: if the wars of tomorrow will look totally unlike the wars of yesterday, what meaningful benefit can history have?

The answer to this question speaks to the broader issue of which groups within a society determine how that community structures its understanding of war.²² As Matthew Ford has illustrated with reference to the doctrine of ‘lethality’, military organisations remain deeply invested in structuring aspects of how society understands the conduct of war.²³ By determining what history is ‘relevant’, modern militaries contribute to a broader process of structuring our understanding of war along lines which reflect current political and social requirements. In the PME context, history thus becomes part of a system of ordering how societies and armed forces think about war, and a series of set case studies potentially encourages that thought to develop along predetermined lines by limiting what is deemed ‘relevant’ to study. Whether this process is as conscious as some would have it is, perhaps, debatable. Nevertheless, even a superficial appreciation of history illustrates that specific anticipations of future war invariably prove to be mistaken, and that aligning doctrine and force structure around such predictions are highly dangerous.²⁴ Just as it would be dangerous to focus on refighting the last war, so it is highly questionable whether preparing to fight the *wrong* next war represents a superior path.

²¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, ‘Developing Today’s Joint Officers for Tomorrow’s Ways of War’, p. 1.

²² Barkawi and Brighton, ‘Powers of War’, pp. 139–41.

²³ Matthew Ford, ‘The Epistemology of Lethality: Bullets, Knowledge Trajectories, Kinetic Effects’, *European Journal of International Security* (Vol. 5, No. 1, February 2020), pp. 77–93.

²⁴ Lawrence Freedman, *The Future of War: A History* (London: Penguin, 2018).

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What are the alternatives? At a fundamental level, alternative approaches require the bold step of PME institutions surrendering attempts to exert complete control over what their students learn, and which forms of knowledge they prioritise. The effectiveness of these efforts, which centre upon the design of a central curriculum, are dubious already. Moreover, they run counter to key aims of modern PME, including the promotion of diverse and creative forms of thought. By contrast, the opportunities of adopting different approaches – which permit students to exercise intellectual curiosity, provide them with time to think and reflect, and allow them to engage with the past as a means of deepening their understanding of the human condition and of war as a phenomenon – are considerable. Jennifer Mittelstadt, Jacqueline Whitt, Vanya Bellinger, Heather Venable and many others involved in PME have made these points in a variety of contexts, underlining the pedagogical innovation possible when curriculum control is relaxed.²⁵ By supporting and encouraging students to engage with history as a means to further their own personal understanding of war in a broad sense, PME institutions can achieve a far more impactful, diverse and long-lasting series of benefits than those which might be on offer via a focus on historical ‘warfighting’ in a narrow sense.

These aims are not necessarily contradictory with the use of ‘cases’ as a pedagogical method *per se*. As Howard observed, the history of war must be understood ‘in width, in depth, and in context’.²⁶ The study of individual wars or campaigns can offer this depth, and encourage students to engage with the complexity and ambiguity which emerges through prolonged research. However, such study must be set against a clear appreciation of the nature of history, and what it can offer to PME. If the aim is, as Howard advised, ‘not to make men clever for next time ... [but] to make them wise forever’ – as is suggested in the Joint Chiefs’ ‘outcomes-based’ approach – then the notion of ‘relevance’ becomes incoherent as a justification for which history is studied. Indeed, viewed in these terms, a greater range of historical study could be seen as directly beneficial to fostering a greater diversity of critical thought about war itself. If a core historical curriculum is required at all, it is therefore one

²⁵ See Jennifer Mittelstadt, ‘Too Much War, Not Enough College’, *War Room*, 20 June 2018, <<https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/articles/too-much-war-not-enough-college/>>, accessed 12 June 2020; Jacqueline E Whitt, ‘Reflections on Reading Great Books with Colonels’, *War on the Rocks*, 25 May 2020; Vanya Eftimova Bellinger, ‘Introducing #Scharnhorst: The Military Society and the Concept of Continuous Education’, *Strategy Bridge*, 24 June 2019, <<https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2019/6/24/introducing-scharnhorst-the-military-society-and-the-concept-of-continuous-education>>, accessed 12 June 2020; Heather Venable, ‘What Happens in White Space Should Not Stay in White Space: Fomenting Creativity in Professional Military Education’, *Strategy Bridge*, 11 June 2019, <<https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2019/6/11/what-happens-in-white-space-should-not-stay-in-white-space-fomenting-creativity-in-professional-military-education>>, accessed 12 June 2020.

²⁶ Howard, ‘The Use and Abuse of Military History’, p. 30.

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History and UK Professional Military Education

This article has necessarily discussed ‘PME’ in general terms in order to explore the relationship between history and modern approaches to the study of war. Yet, there is a case to be made that these arguments have a particular relevance to thinking about military education in the context of the UK. History plays a central role in British public life, and the armed forces enjoy a prominent place within this culture of historicity. Events like Remembrance Day and the commemoration of the anniversaries of the Battle of Britain, Dunkirk or Trafalgar all speak to the enduring symbolic importance of Britain’s military past. Moreover, the armed forces *use* history on a regular basis. The history of regiments, units or services act as an important tool for developing cohesion and a sense of shared identity.²⁷ Perhaps due to this process of inculcation, British military discourse is also replete with historical references and analogies, which are frequently deployed in speeches, policy announcements and in doctrine. Speaking at RUSI in 2018, Chief of the General Staff General Sir Nick Carter made reference to the Army’s new mobilisation scheme, which had been named ‘Project Henry Wilson’ – a direct reference to the army’s director of military operations, who formed plans to send the British Army to France before 1914.²⁸ The defence secretary, Ben Wallace, took a similar approach in December 2020, citing the legend of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig’s supposedly outdated attachment to cavalry as an example of a past failure to comprehend the realities of the evolving battlefield.²⁹ History can thus be seen as a ubiquitous part of how the armed forces relate to British society, how they present and define themselves, and how they communicate their relevance.

Despite the prominent role history plays in how the armed forces are represented within British society, and in the language they use to communicate their purpose, the UK’s military establishment has been reluctant to engage with what its past might mean in the 21st century.

²⁷ Anthony King, ‘The Ethos of the Royal Marines: The Precise Application of Will’, University of Exeter, May 2004; Thomas Thornborrow and Andrew D Brown, “‘Being Regimented’: Aspiration, Discipline, and Identity Work in the British Parachute Regiment’, *Organization Studies* (Vol. 30, No. 4, April 2009), pp. 355–76.

²⁸ General Sir Nicholas Carter, ‘Dynamic Security Threats and the British Army’, 22 January 2018, <<https://rusi.org/event/dynamic-security-threats-and-british-army>>, accessed 14 December 2020.

²⁹ Ministry of Defence and Ben Wallace, ‘Defence Secretary’s Speech on Defence Reform’, 11 December 2020, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/defence-secretarys-speech-on-defence-reform>>, accessed 14 December 2020.

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The implications of its military and imperial history for the image of the armed forces and broadening their recruitment base are excellent examples of where such engagement could prove worthwhile. The prominence of martial valour in the UK's national mythology has been widely discussed in relation to the 75th anniversaries of the Second World War, and in the context of Brexit.³⁰ Such a depiction of historic national greatness remains at odds with a post-colonial reality in which significant numbers of people from former colonial territories are now British citizens. This disconnect continues to pose challenges to recruitment and diversity in the armed forces.³¹ Yet, how to discuss the country's military past in a manner which engages with – rather than ignores – the challenging legacies of imperialism appears to be a low priority for the services. This is a missed opportunity, for as Barkawi and Brighton have argued, 'pluralist celebration of "multiculturalism" denies shared imperial history as a force for unification'.³² Proactive engagement with the realities of the UK's military past can thus be re-framed as the foundations for a more inclusive and historically informed future, rather than as a complex and uncomfortable legacy which ought to be left alone. Doing so within the context of PME would have clear educational benefits, and offer students the chance to engage with precisely the sort of complex and multifaceted elements of historical conflict which could enrich their understanding of war in the round.

Equally important is the necessity of engaging in meaningful analytical depth with historical myths which play a part in justifying or re-enforcing current thinking about strategy and operations. Historical examples and analogies are commonplace in military doctrine and debate, and often serve as justification for particular ideas or policies. Yet, critical engagement with the past is 'particularly variable', and amounts to 'a very limited total'.³³ This lack of attention has no historian's lament: it produces real-world consequences by allowing ideas about the present to be built on faulty assumptions about Britain's military past. Recent British approaches to counterinsurgency, which frequently relied on highly dubious depictions of historic success in Malaya and Northern Ireland, are cases in point.³⁴ Such 'historical cherry

³⁰ David Edgerton, 'How the Myth of "Britain Alone" Overshadows VE Day', *New Statesman*, 7 May 2020.

³¹ Christopher Dandeker and David Mason, 'Diversifying the Uniform? The Participation of Minority Ethnic Personnel in the British Army Services', *Armed Forces & Society* (Vol. 29, No. 4, Summer 2003), pp. 481–507; David Mason and Christopher Dandeker, 'Evolving UK Policy on Diversity in the Armed Services: Multiculturalism and its Discontents', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* (Vol. 47, No. 4, 2009), pp. 393–410.

³² Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton 'Brown Britain: Post-Colonial Politics and Grand Strategy', *International Affairs* (Vol. 89, No. 5, 2013), p. 1119.

³³ A point made by John P Kiszely, 'The Relevance of History to the Military Profession: A British View', in Murray and Sinnreich (eds.), *The Past as Prologue*, pp. 23–25.

³⁴ Huw Bennett, 'Minimum Force in British Counterinsurgency', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* (Vol. 21, No. 3, 2010), pp. 459–75.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *The RUSI Journal* accepted on 21st December 2020 and published online on 2nd February 2021, available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03071847.2021.1876526> picking' is far from a uniquely British problem.³⁵ However, the ways in which history is treated within PME offer a potentially powerful means of challenging such mythologies before they take root, and of avoiding their baleful consequences. As Geoffrey Till as argued, the past will go on being used as a guide or justification for contemporary thought within military organisations.³⁶ Engaging with the past is thus not a choice, it is a necessity.

Conclusion

In his history of the First World War, Winston Churchill reflected on his time as First Lord of the Admiralty in 1914 and 1915. He reflected ruefully on his professional advisers, suggesting that 'the Silent Service was not mute because it was absorbed in thought and study, but because it was weighed down by its daily routine'. The result, he claimed, was 'that at the outset of the conflict we had more captains of ships than captains of war'.³⁷ This distinction captures an essential tension between competing demands on military thought – that between the urgent imperatives of tactical, operational and procedural necessity, and the more abstract, conceptual study of 'war'. This article has aimed to intervene in that discussion by refocusing attention on where and how history can play a role in PME today. In short, it has argued that history can be a misleading tool of military education if it is used in the narrow pursuit of operational insights, or to justify contemporary preoccupations. Yet these are not the only viable ways of thinking about history in the context of PME, and alternative approaches – predicated upon a more conceptually informed debate over how history can deepen our understanding of the nature of war – offer a valuable alternative.

In order for the history of war to play a role in modern military education, it is important to appreciate 'history' not merely as a record of events, but as a way of organising knowledge – in other words to understand the philosophy which underpins how historians study the past. As the late Sir Michael Howard summed up:

[H]istorians may claim to teach lessons, and they often teach them very wisely. But 'history' as such does not. ... The past is infinitely various, an inexhaustible storehouse

³⁵ Brian McAllister Linn, *The Echo of Battle: The Army's Way of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 236–37.

³⁶ Geoffrey Till, 'Teaching Navies their History', in N A M Rodger et al. (eds), *Strategy and the Sea: Essays in Honour of John B. Hattendorf* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2016), p. 251.

³⁷ Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis*, Vol. 1 (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1923), p. 93.

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This does not make the past ‘unusable’ or ‘irrelevant’ to modern armed forces, it just demands conceptual precision about what history is, and what role it can play in modern PME. This difference was summed up pithily by one of the naval officers who served under Churchill at the Admiralty in 1914. Writing in his diary after the war, Herbert Richmond defended his study of history thus: ‘They can’t see that I use it as a means of learning something about strategy, and not as an end in itself – in fact, that I am very averse from *teaching* History, but want it studied as a mental gymnastic, as Foch used it’.³⁹ Much like Corbett before him, and Howard long after, Richmond was endorsing the *philosophy* of history. His aim in studying the past was not to reach conclusions about the present or future, but rather to deepen his understanding of war itself.

Historians do not possess a special say over how the past is understood or used. Analogies will continue to be made, and historical case studies will continue to be used by other disciplines. It is far better that historians engage in an open and productive sense with these practices than to retreat onto a disciplinary high horse in the face of them. More than that, however, it is important to stress that history has a value of its own. It does not need to be ‘applied’ to specific problems or brought to bear on particular policies in order to have worth. To paraphrase Corbett, history offers us a view into the soul of warfare. A more valuable instrument of military education would be difficult to imagine.

³⁸ Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 11.

³⁹ Diary entry, 18 November 1919, in Arthur J Marder (ed.), *Portrait of an Admiral: The Life and Papers of Sir Herbert Richmond* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952), p. 359.