

Military History in the United State

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Writing about war in the United States began in the early nineteenth century as part of the romantic literary tradition, expressed in epic accounts of the European conquest of North America. It was history in the service of civic culture and Protestant Christian virtues. Warfare and military organizations were simply part of the political narrative—albeit an exciting part—written by William Prescott, Francis Parkman, Lyman Draper, and Henry Adams, among others, and shared similarities with the historical fiction of Herman Melville and James Fenimore Cooper. History as great literature, however, began to pale toward the end of the century (the deluge of Civil War memoirs notwithstanding) as a new intellectual movement

—scientific realism—reshaped historical writing. Although American literature retained its English roots, historical research and writing became transformed by German academic and military trends. Alfred Thayer Mahan may have been the last military writer to reflect unabashedly English literary norms. Emory Upton, his U.S. Army contemporary, cared not a whit for readability, but evidence, statistics, analysis, and argumentation in the best German tradition.

The United States armed forces found historical study a useful tool for arguing for institutional reform during the Progressive period (roughly 1890—1920 and for educating officers to new professional norms. Civilian historians fled

the field in search of more “significant” topics like social change, urban development, land policy, immigration, intellectual movements, and economic history. Political history tended to be narrow electoral and administrative history, not the interplay of power and the instruments of power like war. As universities began to develop historical studies free of civics, classics, and “moral philosophy,” faculty members (few of whom had served in the armed forces after the Civil War) embraced the assumption that the study of war was insignificant enough to be left to soldiers. At the time of World War I, Professor Robert U. Johnson, a Harvard University professor and the editor of Battles and Leaders of the Civil War (1887—1888) taught the only military history course in an American university. Although the number of universities that offered studies of warfare probably reached ten by World War II, the field remained fallow except at a few elite institutions like Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, and the University of Chicago.

The armed forces experienced no such reluctance to plunge into historical studies and to expand the institutional base of such work from their schools system

to their headquarters staffs during World War I. Military history as corporate memory in the United States military establishment started with World War I, although nothing like the “official history” program of World War II. This type of military history was truly “military.” The work was defined by the perceived needs of the armed forces, especially the officer corps. The stress in subject matter was upon operational and tactical issues, leadership, wartime mobilization and management, and inspirational stories of combat actions. Military authors and editors felt no need to link this military history to a larger civilian political, social, and economic context, even though this linkage explained most of the difficulties of creating a nation—in—arms for the two world wars. The effort to create some written record of World War I, however, convinced senior officers that the American participation in World War II required a major institutional commitment to preserving records, putting participant—historians into the field, and organizing major postwar publication programs.

The field history programs of World War II created an uneasy postwar fusion of the military's military history and some academic history curricula, undergraduate and

graduate. The change—agents were the servicemen and civilians who had worked for the armed forces in World War II and then entered academic life after the war. Some of the temporary military historians who had prewar doctorates remained in the postwar military history divisions to write and edit the official histories of the war. A significant number of the wartime historians joined or rejoined the faculty of elite universities, which guaranteed a wave of second-generation military historians during the Cold War years, especially since the second—generation historians (including the author) often had military service as well. Military historians benefitted from interdisciplinary programs in “national security studies,” even though political scientists dominated such programs. Another stimulus to military history courses was the U.S. Army's decision to allow civilian professors to teach Reserve Officers Training Corps cadets. This plan, designed in part to defuse anti—Army and anti—draft agitation on campuses, benefitted undergraduate history enrollments, but had little impact on graduate education. It did, however, justify the creation of a high—quality military history summer colloquium at the U.S. Military Academy,

which, after an interruption, continues.

A parallel development in military education after World War II also enlarged the pool of university—educated specialists in the history of warfare. When the four service academies (including the Coast Guard Academy) sought academic accreditation in order to award legitimate four—year degrees, essential in attracting quality cadets and midshipmen, the academies had to provide officer—professors with MA degrees at a minimum and lesser numbers of doctorates for the select permanent military faculty. Only the Naval Academy had true civilian faculty members until the 1980s, so the Army and the Air Force had to keep a stream of officers headed to graduate school. Both services then assigned these scholar—officers throughout the military education system as well as the service historical divisions. Many upon retirement found positions in civilian colleges and universities, although seldom in elite institutions. Nevertheless, their military proteges and civilian students became another source of aspiring military historians.

Since the 1990s, however, positions for military historians in government and the universities have shrunken under

budgetary pressures in both systems. The specialization has always been regarded - justly or not—as “nice to have,” but not essential to the services or history departments. There is no evidence of an un surge of interest linked to the “War on Terrorism,” as there was none in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War. In academic history departments, the essential criteria have nothing to do with officer education. Instead, military history must be related to the larger issues of culture change and continuity and the special demands of defining the national experience; a military history program in many departments is simply defined as a course on the Civil War and another on World War II. The study of military affairs, which should be dealt with as an international, comparative experience, is just one of many aspects of national or regional history. It is possible that the growing interest in teaching multi-cultural international history may prove a boon to more courses. Military history has proved to be blessed with phoenix-like qualities, largely because the state-system and human behavior continues to create wars and fascinate readers.