



Napoleon Bonaparte at the Battle of Austerlitz, 2 December 1805. The battle, the most important of the Napoleonic Wars, was a decisive victory for France.

Why Study History?

by Jonathan Cox

Military history in and of itself is of little value. The study of history must be about more than simple facts and figures of the past if it is to be useful. The effective study of military history helps to build a conceptual framework for the study of historical context, generating pseudo-experience that can be applied to modern-day problems. If examined on a wide front and probed deeply, history will uncover many truths, forcing one to ask the right questions in an attempt to truly understand the obscured nature of historical events. Seeking these answers provides access to the collective knowledge of the profession of arms which can add to or supplant practical experience. The search for such knowledge ought to begin now, particularly in young military professionals, in order to develop the capacity to effectively apply these skills when needed.

There are those who believe that history is of no use in understanding modern conflict. They argue that conditions of today have evolved to such a point that historical examples are incapable of being replicated in modern terms. This viewpoint is based upon a narrow assumption that history is only useful for providing simple answers to old problems. If history is used solely to search for direct correlations to discover archetypal solution sets to today's problems, then the military professional is doomed to failure. To garner true value, one must understand *what* the study of history provides and *how* to apply its lessons.

Clausewitz discusses the proper and improper use of historical examples. He acknowledges that some examples provide simple explanations of events. However, it is when history is used to prove the possibility of an effect or to deduce a doctrine that it provides the greatest benefit to the education of military

professionals.¹ Even then, it is not the conclusions themselves that are of most value; it is the development of creative and critical thinking skills that teaches one how to effectively apply history. Historical events must be understood within specific historical context, "which is always unique," if it is to "offer meaningful lessons from history."² History itself will not provide concrete answers to future challenges, but it can uncover a path.

The importance of history is the skills gained from its rigorous inquisition. This will help to produce generalized concepts to inform future actions. The validity of these concepts will increase relative to sample size by challenging assumptions from differing viewpoints and highlighting the uncertainties present in the nature of conflict. The role of history is to "illuminate for the military professional the true, 'untidiness' of history" and highlight the complex and unclear interplay between factors.³ The goal is to provide a framework within which to think about the problems themselves. This framework can then be used to glean potential solutions based upon *general themes* and balanced against *current conditions*. It is the process of analysis that provides the ultimate value, not the history itself.

Professional knowledge can be gained through practical or educational experiences. The study of military history provides the most reliable method, since it is readily available to any individual willing to seek out the information. Practical experience often is a product of circumstances beyond the control of the military professionals.⁴ Even though the study of history does not equate directly to experience, it does provide a reliable backdrop that can approximate experience. Even direct experience itself will not necessarily provide the skills to deduce solutions to future problems. The value is not gained until that experience is analyzed

and internalized. It is this process of examination that develops stronger intuition to help frame future thinking, just as the proper study of history will provide.

By understanding why conflicts occurred and how they unfolded, whether directly experienced or studied, one can begin to understand the conditions of the time and generalize theories to develop a deeper understanding. Furthermore, the range of historical examples available as a portion of the corporate knowledge of the entire profession of arms extends well beyond the experience available to any one individual.⁵ This pseudo-experience can be used to better adapt historical models to new scenarios, creating analogues of old problems within current conditions.⁶ It is not about the right *facts*, but using the framework to ask the right *questions* that generates value.⁷

In considering the application of military history, it is important to consider the time constraints imposed on the individuals relied upon to produce viable recommendations or decisions. Effectively synthesizing and applying historical information is a time-consuming process. The time to conduct an in-depth analysis of emerging problems will not always be available. Thus, it behoves one to have this information available, or at the very least, to be

in possession of the skills to rapidly deduce relevant context.⁸ Military professionals ought to practice this skill often in order to be able to deliver thoughtful and coherent recommendations when required.

Military history, when understood and applied properly, is a valuable tool for the military professional. It is insufficient to simply apply past examples directly to emerging problems. The key is to use history to deduce patterns and relationships to supplement experience and build intuition. Understanding history cannot wait until a problem emerges. The study of history must begin now if it is to support effective application in the future.

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Peter Horree/Alamy Stock Photo/GDAMK9



The storming of Height 285 by German troops at Argonne, France, 13 July 1915.

NOTES

- 1 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Peter Paret and Michael Howard [eds.], (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 170-171.
- 2 Jay Luvaas, "Military History: Is It Still Practicable?" in *Parameters* 12 (March 1982), pp. 2-24; reprinted in US Army Command and General Staff College, H100 Syllabus and Book of Readings (Fort Leavenworth, KS: USACGSC, July 2017), p. 25.
- 3 Dominick Graham, "Stress Lines and Gray Areas: The Utility of the Historical Method to the Military Profession," in *Military History and the Military Profession*, David A. Charters, Marc Milner, and J. Brent Wilson [eds.], (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1992), p. 148.
- 4 Field Marshal Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, *A Concise History of Warfare* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, Editions Ltd, 2000), p. 15.
- 5 Luvaas, pp. 30-31; Michael Evans, "The Role of Military History in the Education of Future Officers," accessed 9 October 2017, at: <www.dtic.mil/get-tr-doc/pdf?AD=ADA336221>, p. 1.
- 6 Jim Lacey, "Old Ideas for a New War," reprinted in US Army Command and General Staff College, H100 Syllabus and Book of Readings (Fort Leavenworth, KS: USACGSC, July 2017), p. 45.
- 7 Luvaas, pp. 28-29, 35.
- 8 Anne N. Foreman, "Foreword" in *Military History and the Military Profession*. p. xi.