

# Introduction

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This yearbook is the result of the 9<sup>th</sup> Estonian military history conference, “The past – soldier’s guide for the present? Experience, History and Theory in Military Education,” which took place in Tartu in May 2018. It was organized by the Estonian War Museum – General Laidoner Museum in cooperation with the Estonian Military Academy.

While laying the conceptual basis for the conference, we were inspired in part by the success of the 7<sup>th</sup> conference of 2016, which had explored the ways military organizations envision and predict future wars. At that conference it became clear that, while there has certainly been a fair amount of technological futurism in war preparations, history and experience has always been an important point of reference. But what kind of history? What kind of experience? – this was the moot question.

In his memorable, starkly down-to-earth keynote lecture, Martin van Creveld warned against overemphasizing academic studies in military education:

War is a practical business – at times, so much so as to discourage abstract thought about it. It has much in common with playing an instrument or, at the higher levels, conducting an orchestra. The objective is victory, not dishing up all sorts of insights. Not even the best theories can save us from the enemy’s sharp sword. The best teacher of war is war. Commanders must start by mastering their job at the lowest level. Next, they must proceed step by step until the most competent reach the highest level of all. With each step additional factors enter the picture. Some are military, others political, economic, social, cultural, and religious. At the top, there is hardly any aspect of human behaviour which does not impinge on war’s conduct.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Martin van Creveld, “Studying War”, unpublished notes for the keynote lecture at the conference “Visions of War: Experience, Imagination and Predictions of War in the Past and the Present,” Estonian War Museum – General Laidoner Museum, 19–20 April 2016, Tallinn.

Thus, while discouraging excessive dwelling on academic subjects at the lower levels, Creveld ended by laying great weight on history at higher levels of military education:

To fire one's weapon, or command a platoon, experience is enough so that little history and theory are needed. But the higher up one gets and the more factors enter the picture, the less we can count on experience and the more important therefore history and theory.<sup>2</sup>

Encouraged in part by Creveld's keynote, we wanted to study in greater depth the role of military history in officers' education and training. We asked scholars to critically consider the following questions: What is the position of history in military pedagogy? To what extent should armed forces, beside tactics, study the political, cultural and social contexts of war-fighting? Is it necessary to understand also the civilian perspective on the conduct of war? How can one assure that history is taught "in width, in depth, and in context", as was suggested by Michael Howard?<sup>3</sup>

The other stimulus for the choice of the topic was the ongoing crisis in the military history discipline in Estonia. As Igor Kopõtin noted in 2016, there was a disagreement between military professionals and civilian historians, as the first doubted in the ability of the second to gain any useful insights from their research into military topics.<sup>4</sup> For example, in 2016 a meeting was held in Tartu between civilian military historians and representatives of the Estonian Military Academy (EMA). An officer from EMA explained the armed forces' point of view, comparing historians to "spies", who similar to historians provide the army with "data". The problem, he said, was that often the military did not know what they needed to know, and when they realised what they needed to know, they needed to know it fast; there was however no use whatsoever in historians offering their "data" to the military by themselves.<sup>5</sup> This conflict, the divergence of

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Howard, "The Use and Abuse of Military History," *The RUSI Journal* 107, no. 625 (1962): 4–10.

<sup>4</sup> Igor Kopõtin, "Sõjaajaloo õpetamisest ja uurimisest," *Sõdur* 6 (2016): 45–49.

<sup>5</sup> Kaarel Piirimäe, "Sõjaajalugu – kellele ja milleks? Sõjaajaloo perspektiivid (III)," *Tuna. Aja-lookultuuriajakiri* 1 (2017): 146–149.

views in the armed forces and the civilian world, Kopõtin observed, was not unique to Estonia but had been played out along similar lines in other countries; it was to be regretted that Estonia was not too keen to learn from the experience of others and was essentially trying to re-invent the wheel.<sup>6</sup>

By organizing the 2018 conference, “The past – soldier’s guide for the present?”, we wanted to inform the Estonian debates by bringing examples from other countries, but also to look into Estonia’s own – forgotten and neglected – experience from the period of independence between the world wars. Looking back from the vantage point of 2020, we have not been overly successful – yet – as the crisis in the military history discipline in the Estonian Armed Forces has not abated. Whereas there were three historians on the payroll of the Military Academy before 2016, now there is only one, and the utility of history in (the first and second levels of) officer education is in serious doubt.

Perhaps there is no need to worry? Maybe war is a practical business that does not require “dishing up all sorts of insights,” as Creveld said? Still, we prefer take a cue from Creveld’s assurance that if a military professional rises higher from the level of firing a weapon and leading a platoon, learning from history becomes a must.

Moreover, this selection of articles – based on the 2018 conference papers – that are presented in this yearbook provides much ammunition for arguing for the practical need of history in military education. Moreover, they give many useful ideas about how to think about the nature of military history, and this is useful for understanding not only military history as part of officer education but for contemplating the discipline of history as such. However, in order to be clear that we are doing it not for the pure pleasure of abstract theorizing, let us end with another dire warning from Martin van Creveld:

War is the most important thing in the world. When the chips are down, it rules over the existence of every single country, government and individual. That is why, though it may come but once in a hundred years,

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<sup>6</sup> Kopõtin, “Sõjaajaloo õpetamisest,” 49.

it must be prepared for every day. When the bodies lie cold and stiff, and the survivors mourn over them, those in charge have failed in their duty.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Crevelde, "Studying War."