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Descriptive and Applied Military History – debating the utility of military history in Danish officer education[1]

Anna Sofie Hansen Schøning

Abstract. In the 1970s Danish debates on military history revealed a bifurcated understanding of military history between descriptive and applied military history. Descriptive military history was the study of military history done by academic historians, and applied military history was done by and taught to officers. The divide between descriptive and applied was rooted in the professionalization of history and officer education; it was constructed in order to accommodate the criticism that military history used in officer education did not live up to academic standards. By taking the Danish debates in the 1970s as a point of departure, this article introduces some fundamental challenges regarding the use of military history in officer education. Inspired by the German historian Reinhart Koselleck, the article argues that developments within academic history since the 1970s might have alleviated the conflict between academic military history and the military history used in officer education. Certainly, these new developments have opened up new approaches to military history.

In 1974, a seminar took place in Copenhagen under the name "Where has military history gone? A discussion of military history" (*Hvor blev militærhistorien af? En Diskussion om militærhistorisk forskning*). The purpose of the seminar was to promote and strengthen military history by uniting officers and trained academics within the field of military history. However,

[1] The following article is based on preliminary studies of the author's Ph.D. project analysing the use of history in Danish army officer education.

it soon became clear that bridging the gap between these two parties was not a simple task. Besides the political difference of environment regarding officers and academics, a fundamental question of the character of military history emerged. In particular, the seminar participants disagreed on the purpose of military history as taught in officer education.

In the 1970s, Danish research on military history was scarce, and had been so since the turn of the century. Research into Danish military history was limited to the extent that at times it was synonymous with the work undertaken by a small military history department of the Danish General Staff. Generally, military history in Denmark was written by officers. An aversion to military history had existed amongst academic historians since the turn of the century. The history departments of Danish universities had no chairs, big or small, in military history.[2] The Danish academic disinterest in military history was already clear in 1920 when General Lieutenant and honorary Doctor of History August Peder Tuxen gave a speech at the Nordic history meeting in Oslo. Tuxen expressed his regret that not more academically trained historians did research in the field of military history and furthermore defended the value of some of the publications on military history made by officers.[3] These tendencies are not unique to Denmark. In many other Western countries, academic historians largely shunned military history.[4] At the seminar in 1974, however, the Danish situation was perceived as particularly sombre, as it was expressed that the situation in Denmark was worse than in neighbouring Sweden. In contrast to Denmark, research groups working on research within the category of military history could be found at Swedish universities in Umeå, Göteborg and Lund.[5]

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[2] Claus C. von Barnekow, Kaare E. Janson and Ole L. Frantzen, *Hvor blev Militærhistorien af?: En diskussion om militærhistorisk forskning* (København: HRFV, 1975), 2.

[3] August Peder Tuxen, *Dansk Krigshistorieskrivning i de sidste hundrede aar: Foredrag holdt ved det Nordiske Historikermøde i Kristiania 1920* (København: Vilhelm Tryde, 1921).

[4] See Michael Howard, "The Use and Abuse of Military History," *RUSI Journal* 107, no. 625 (1962): 4–10; John A. Lynn, "Breaching the Walls of Academe: The Purposes, Problems, and Prospects of Military History," *Academic Questions* 21, no. 1 (2008): 18–36; Williamson Murray, Richard Hart Sinnreich, eds., *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[5] Barnekow, Janson and Frantzen, *Hvor blev Militærhistorien af?*, 16.

The differences between academic historians' and officers' approaches to military history became apparent at the seminar, unfolding further in biennial conferences on military history and in articles in historical journals. By taking the Danish debates as point of departure, this article will introduce some fundamental and well-known challenges regarding the use of military history in officer education.[6] The debates on military history that took place in the 1970s Denmark revealed a bifurcated understanding of military history created to accommodate the criticism that military history used in officer education attracted. This article examines this distinction between applied and descriptive military history and how it was rooted in the professionalization of history and officer education. It ends by contemplating whether changes in academic history since the 1970s have somewhat alleviated the conflict between academic history and military history as utilised in officer education.

At the seminar on military history in 1974, the following reasons were given to explain the hardships of military history in Danish historiography: political antimilitarism amongst historians, the professionalization of both history and the military profession, and the non-academic use of military history among officers.[7] These reasons all, in one way or another, relate to the utility of military history. One of the speakers at the meeting, Dr. Carl-Axel Gemzell of the University of Lund, explained the political antimilitarism among academic historians by pointing out that, leading up to and during the First World War, military history was used for propagandist purposes and to encourage armament. Danish historians in the beginning of the 20th century predominantly belonged to the political Party *Radikale Venstre* (Radical Left) that carried very strong antimilitaristic sentiments. Therefore, academic historians did not want to participate in endeavours that could be seen as endorsing militarism.[8] As a result, war was increasingly seen as an abnormality in the course

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[6] See Thomas Kühne and Benjamin Ziemann, eds., *Was ist Militärgeschichte?* Krieg in der Geschichte 6 (Paderborn: Schnönigh, 2000); Ursula von Gersdorff, *Geschichte und Militärgeschichte: Wege der Forschung* (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard & Graefe Verlag für Wehrwesen, 1974); Murray, Sinnreich, *The Past as Prologue*.

[7] Barnekow, Janson and Frantzen, *Hvor blev Militærhistorien af?*.

[8] Ibid., 12.

of history and therefore not as something necessary to devote attention to. However, it was not only academic historians' sceptical attitudes that threatened military use of military history. Gemzell points to a bureaucratization process that happened after the Second World War where the academics, who were becoming part of military staffs, did not include historians. Instead, they came primarily from the social sciences, more specifically economists, sociologists, political scientists and anthropologists. With their systematizing and empirically experimental approach they took over tasks that used to be that of the historian, and military history lost its monopoly on creating the empirical foundation for military theory.[9]

Regarding the non-academic writing of military history as a reason for academic historians' disinclinations towards military history, another speaker at the seminar, archivist and historian Hans Christian Bjerg, pointed to the lack of source criticism and sufficient context information leading academic historians to dismiss work written by officers. Paradoxically, the few academic historians who did venture to write military history often received harsh criticism from officers, who argued that the academics lacked sufficient tactical and technical knowledge.[10]

The third reason regarding the professionalization of history as a cause for the hardships of military history concerns the way military history was taught in officer education. Lieutenant Colonel K.V. Nielsen was in 1974 a teacher of military history at the Army Academy (*Hærens Officersskole*) and teacher of strategy at the Royal Danish Defence College (*Forsvarsakademiet*). According to Nielsen, the role of military history was to bind together the three fundamental elements of officer education: operations in war and peace, political science and administration in war and peace, and basic understanding of the conditions on the battlefield. An important function was thereby to introduce the cadets to the Clausewitzian concept of friction.[11] When teaching cadets about friction and battlefield chaos, Nielsen did not distinguish between learning from offi-

[9] Barnekow, Janson and Frantzen, *Hvor blev Militaerhistorien af?*, 13.
[10] Ibid., 6.
[11] Ibid., 28–32.

cial records, personal accounts, or novels. He stated that studying other types of accounts will allow the officer to get closer to reality than field exercises.[12] It is unclear whether it is necessary that the narratives that one learns from are meticulously based on facts about what actually happened, or is it is sufficient that the accounts are realistic. This ambiguity is another reason why military history in this context has been in conflict with academic history.

Overall, Nielsen's view of the utility of military history in officer education aligns with that of the renowned military historian Sir Michael Howard:

> Like the statesman, the soldier has to steer between the dangers of repeating the errors of the past because he is ignorant that they have been made, and of remaining bound by theories deduced from past history although changes in conditions have rendered these theories obsolete.[13]

Nielsen further cited military theorist General Giulio Douhet and his thought that "The preparation for war demands, then, exercise of the imagination; we are compelled to make a mental excursion into the future."[14] Military history in officer education had a clear utility. This utility conflicted with academic history, as I will show in the following chapter.

Military History and *Magistra Vitae*

With the professionalization of history, the notion that it is possible to learn from military history came under attack. In the above quote by Sir Michael Howard from his programmatic article *The Use and Abuse of Military History*, cited by Nielsen at the conference, a clear understanding that studying military history can prepare the officer for future battle is present – learning from the past can make the officer wiser for the future.

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[12] "Militærhistorisk konference '75 – en rapport: København, 15.–16. marts 1975" (København: Hærstabens Militærhistoriske Arbejder, 1975), 54–56.

[13] Howard, "The Use and Abuse," 7.

[14] Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air* (Washington: Office of air force history, 1983), 145.

The notion that it is possible to learn from history was coined in Latin antiquity in Cicero's *De Oratore* as "*Historia Magistra Vitae Est*" – history as the teacher of life. *Magistra vitae* was a guiding principle of history for centuries. A classical understanding of *magistra vitae* in the 18th century was that history should be used as a collection of former actions and ways of life that could provide inspiration or dissuasion and guide people on how to best live their lives.[15] Besides its instructive properties, *magistra vitae* also often had morally edifying qualities. It was considered that the role of the historian was to make clear what model behaviour the reader or listener should follow.[16] History was seen as a field of experience from which one could harvest experience, skipping laborious and time-consuming trial-and-error processes. According to the German historian Reinhart Koselleck: "Thus the writing of history was considered for about two thousand years or so to be a place of learning where one could become wiser without coming to any harm."[17] It is easy to see why this approach to history would appeal to the officer, who, as pointed out in Michael Howard's quote, would likely not have any previous experience of war.

> If there are no wars in the present in which the professional soldier can learn his trade, he is almost compelled to study the wars of the past. For after all allowances have been made for historical differences, wars still resemble each other more than they resemble any other human activity.[18]

The concept of *magistra vitae* becomes maybe even more visible in a later quote by Howard: "Past wars provide the only database from which the military learn how to conduct their profession: how to do it and even more important, how not to do it."[19]

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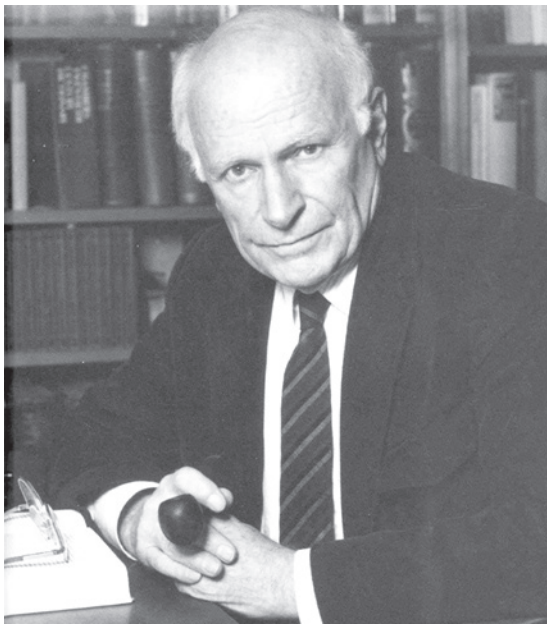
15 Bernard Eric Jensen, "Using a Past – Magistra Vitae Approaches to History," – *Negotiating Pasts in the Nordic Countires. Interdisciplinary Studies in History and Memory*, ed. Anne Eriksen and Jón Vidar Sigurdsson (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2009), 214.

16 Anne Eriksen, "Livets Læremester," *Tidsskrift for Kulturforskning* 9, no. 2 (2010): 39–54.

17 Cited in Jensen, "Using a Past," 205.

18 Howard, "The Use and Abuse," 7.

19 Michael Howard, "Military History and the History of War," – *The Past as Prologue. The Importance of History to the Military Profession*, ed. Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 13.



Reinhart Koselleck (1923–2006), one of the greatest historians of the 20th century, in his study. Koselleck's novel approach to the theory of history has encouraged the rethinking of the nature of military history too. Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

However, with the professionalization of history beginning in the late 17th century the *magistra* vitae approach to history was gradually rejected. This rejection can be summed up in the famous quote by Leopold von Ranke: "History has had assigned to it the office of judging the past and of instructing the present for the benefit of the future ages. To such high offices the present work does not presume: it seeks only to show what actually happened [*wie es eigentlich gewesen*]."[20] History should no longer be action indicating, instruct the present and guide the future, but was with its professionalization viewed as a strictly ideographic science, meaning that history became a science about unique events that once were, conducted by professional historians. History distinguished itself from other sciences by its special subject matter – the past – that can never be approached directly, but only indirectly through remnants of the past in the shape of various source material.

[20] Leopold von Ranke, "Preface: Histories of the Romance and Germanic Peoples," – *The Varieties of History. From Voltaire to the Present*, ed. Fritz Stern (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 57.

The rejection of the *magistra vitae* approach to history made it difficult, if not impossible, to use military history in officer education in the way described by K.V. Nielsen, while at the same time adhering to the academic standards of history. The extent of the conflict between academic history and the notion that military history has utility, I argue, depends on how this utility is understood. Inspired by historian and Brigadier General Michael H. Clemmesen, a way to understanding the utility of military history is to distinguish between learning form military history in the way of guidance, and in the way of insight.[21] By military history offering guidance, is meant that it is possible to derive action-indicating principles of war from the past. This is also what Michael Howard has called "school solutions" in his introductory article of the anthology *The Past as Prologue*[22] and what Clemmesen calls "Enlightenment tradition of identifying theoretical patterns and seeking positive guidance from a systematic analysis of the measurable extracts of a significant number of cases."[23] Military history then becomes generalizing and predictive, and therefore clashes with the standards of academic history.

However, if one believes military history only offers general insight from the study of past wars, the conflict with academic history becomes less clear. Defining what is meant by military history yielding "general insight" is more difficult than defining what is meant by "guidance". According to Clemmesen, military history offering general insight entails that "The maximum they [past military cases] can do is to highlight general human and organizational as well as specific cultural frailties that are likely to undermine the effectiveness of preparations for and action in war."[24] However, this does not mean that the past should not be studied or that this kind of insight can be gained once and for all. Rather, gaining insight from military history generates knowledge about human character and life, similar in a sense to wisdom. But, as military historian John R. Lynn points out, "To be sure, there is no guarantee that histori-

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[21] Michael H. Clemmesen, "Combat Case History in Advanced Officer Development: Extracting what is difficult to apply," *Baltic Security and Defence Review* 17, no. 2 (2014): 38.

[22] Howard, "Military History and the History of War," 13.

[23] Clemmesen, "Combat Case History," 38.

[24] Ibid., 57.

cal knowledge translates into current wisdom, but knowledge is a better hedge against disaster than is ignorance".[25] With this kind of pragmatic attitude towards military history the opposition to academic history diminishes as the form of knowledge obtained is intangible. The boundaries between insight and guidance are, however, not clear.

When reading different works that touch on the subject of learning from military history, it can be very difficult to discern whether the authors believe it possible to use military history as guiding principles of war, or if they believe it possible only to gain insight of the study of past wars, and exactly how the learning processes take place. Some authors, explicitly committed to Michael Howard's study of history, contradictorily believe in the possibility to deduct positive principles from war.[26] A central question to military history is therefore to what extent it is possible to generalize from past experiences in preparing for the future. Where does guidance stop and where does insight start – are they dichotomic categories or should the two concepts be viewed as poles on a continuum? And does the understanding of learning clash with academic standards of history? I will further elaborate on these questions by returning to the aforementioned debates about the character of military history in Denmark.

Military history – science or art?

At the seminar in 1974, archivist and historian Hans Christian Bjerg expressed his views about how the different goals of the officers on the one hand and the academically trained historians on the other might explain why military history had regressed. He pointed to the lack of the distinction between what he called descriptive (*beskrivende*) and applied (*anvendt*) military history as a reason for this regression:

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[25] John A. Lynn, "Breaching the Walls of Academe: The purposes, problems, and prospects of military history," *Academic Questions* 21 (2008), 22.

[26] Michael H. Clemmesen and Anna Sofie Schøning, "På Vej Til Antologien Og Dette Binds Eksempler," – *Om Læring Og Indsigt Fra Krig. Isted 1850 Til Musa Qala 2006*, ed. Michael H. Clemmesen (Odense: Syddansk Universtitetsforlag, 2018), 11–23.

> I have often speculated if this dilemma has developed because the two categories have very different objectives as to their research and writing – and that it all boils down to the fact that the distinction between what I call descriptive and applied military history has not been made.
>
> It is evident and completely legitimate that officers need to analyse past battles and technologically special military situations with the purpose of gaining experience for future situations. In this case the officer has a clear-cut purpose with his military historical research – or rather, military technical research applied to historical data; it would however be wrong to merely translate this circumstance to being pragmatic history writing.
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> The academic historian will contrarily rarely have this pragmatic goal for his studies. Maybe this is the reason for the restraining dilemma.[27]

Bjerg first introduced the distinction between applied and descriptive military history when reviewing a book on military history, *Militærhistorie,* written by Lieutenant Colonel Helge Klint, for the history journal *Historisk Tidsskift* in 1971.[28] The book gave a general introduction to military history, and was published in 1970 based on an orientation about military history given as an introductory course for first year history students at University of Copenhagen in the winter of 1967/68.[29] Lieutenant Colonel Klint was one of very few Danish officers who had taught at a university history department at the time. Klint himself used the term "applied history" in his book,[30] but was criticized by Bjerg for not focusing more on the distinction between applied and descriptive military history. According to Bjerg, applied military history is military technical analysis including military theoretical studies, where the main purpose is to provide the officer with knowledge he can use for future situations. What he means by

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[27] Bjerg in Claus C. von. Barnekow, Ole Louis Frantzen and Kaare E. Janson, *Hvor blev militærhistorien af?: en diskussion om militærhistorisk forskning* (Kbh.: [s.n.], 1975), 6f. All Danish translations are by the author.

[28] Hans Christian Bjerg, "Helge Klint: Militærhistorie," *Historisk Tidsskrift* 12, no. 5 (1971): 185–186.

[29] Helge Klint, *Militærhistorie* (København: Dansk historisk Fællesforenings håndbøger, 1970), 109, 5.

[30] Klint, *Militærhistorie*, 11.

descriptive military history is vaguer and is not described further than it is academic historians' historical analysis of military affairs.[31]

Bjerg is himself not quite clear in his definition of the two concepts, as he predominantly addresses instances where the two have been mixed. As long as the distinction was made between these two kinds of military history, Bjerg did not view applied history as problematic – it was simply a form that did not have to live up to the standards of academic history.[32] Conversely, when this distinction was made, historical research was not tainted by a non-academic utilitarian purpose and met academic standards. However, not all historians of the time agreed with this distinction. Contrary to Bjerg, assistant professor and future associate professor at the University of Southern Denmark Knud J.V. Jespersen saw this distinction as highly problematic. This distinction became the crux of a debate on the use of military history that followed the first conference of military history in 1974.

According to Knud J. V. Jespersen, the distinction between applied and descriptive military history could be traced back to an article about military history written by B.P Berthelsens in the Danish Encyclopedia *Salmonsens store illustrerede Konversationsleksikon* in 1900. In this article, it was expressed that military history could either be a purely historical study of the sources – with the purpose of getting as close as possible to the transpired events – or serve educational purposes to officers.[33] Here Jespersen reads Berthelsens' definition of two forms of history as comparable to Nielsen's concepts of descriptive and applied military history. According to Jespersen, this was a widespread understanding of military history around the turn of the century when disciplines were divided into applied and descriptive, inspired by the natural sciences. The task of the historian was to deliver objective and truthful descriptions from which the officer could derive what was generally applicable and useful for the future.[34]

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31 Bjerg, "Helge Klint: Militærhistorie," 185f.

32 Barnekow, Janson and Frantzen, *Hvor blev Militærhistorien af?*, 7.

33 Knud J. V. Jespersen, "Krigshistorioens Lære Og Krigens Historikere," *Historie/Jyske Samlinger* Ny række, no. 12 (1977): 27.

34 Jespersen, "Krigshistorioens," 28.

This distinction can be traced even further back. In the very first educational plans of the Danish Royal Military Academy from 1830 one can also find this distinction in the form of two different military history subjects: Denmark's Military History (*Danmarks Krigshistorie*) and Campaign History (*Feldttogshistorie*). Denmark's Military History was, judging from the textbook made for the subject and published in 1834, a classical historical subject with a focus on providing the officer with knowledge of Danish military feats.[35] In Campaign History, students analysed one or two campaigns and compared the conclusions of this analysis with the dominant military theory. This course was a development of the course in what was called applied tactics (*anvendt taktik*) and required knowledge of troop movement and the guiding principles of warfare.[36] Even though the concepts of "descriptive" and "applied" history were not used here, the difference in the two subjects can be said to follow the same logic as the distinction between descriptive and applied history: Denmark's military history being a traditional historical past-orientated subject and campaign history being a subject using the past only if it is relevant for the present and the future.

According to Jespersen, the applied version of military history should be avoided altogether. In an article about the battle of Lutter am Barenberg, Jespersen stated that the lessons being drawn from this battle were a poorly made construction. The lessons drawn, he argued, could not be separated from the historical research since they were selected depending heavily on exactly that research. Hence it was a futile idea to divide military history in a descriptive part, which produces objective knowledge of the past, and an applied part, where lessons for the future were drawn based on the descriptive military history.[37] This attitude to military history is supported by Norwegian historian and PhD in Philosophy Lieutenant Colonel Harald Høiback who agrees that the lessons of history are

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[35] Anna Sofie Schøning, "Mellem Historie- Og Krigsvidenskab: Krigshistorie i Udbygningen Af Hærens Stabsofficersuddannelse 1830–1920," *Fra Krig Og Fred* (2017), 37.

[36] Schøning, "Mellem Historie- Og Krigsvidenskab," 41f.

[37] Jespersen, "Krigshistorioens," 30.

the lessons of the historian; when one looks for answers in history, one usually finds what one came after.[38]

Therefore, an important question is whether it is at all possible to draw objective knowledge from the past. To Bjerg, who believed that it was in fact possible to have objective historical knowledge, it became essential that the applied and descriptive versions of military history were separated. Jespersen fully dismissed the thought of any lessons learning from military history as he explained it would always be the lessons of the military historian as opposed to lessons from history itself.[39] In another article from 1977, Jespersen delves more into what the distinction between descriptive and applied means for military history.[40] He explained it as a result of military history belonging to the military sciences and therefore was considered an exact science rather than a critical one (as he calls his own understanding of history). In the 1977 article, Jespersen criticized Lieutenant Colonel Nielsen's understanding of military history as it was expressed at the conference in 1974.[41] This led Nielsen to defend his view of military history. Nielsen explained that, due to the limited time to discuss the relevant questions at the army school, it was not possible for the student to conduct any historical research. This does, according to Nielsen, not mean that the way military history is studied at the Danish Army Academy is not serious, or that it did not strive to live up to academic standards.[42] However, Nielsen did not try to hide that he believed that officers can be better prepared for the future by studying military history and that military history can help find what is constant in the conduct of war. On the utility of military history, he writes:

> This is, as I view it, not an antiquated conception about 'the lessons of military history', it is rather a completely viable and highly relevant

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38 Harald Høiback, "Kan vi Lære Av Historien? En Studie i Militær Kompetansefilosofi," *Forsvarsstudier* 1 (2003): 70f.

39 Jespersen, "Krigshistorioens," 46.

40 Knud J. V. Jespersen, "En Militærhistorisk Renaissance?," *Historisk Tidsskrift* 4, no. 13 (1977): 135–142.

41 Jespersen, "En Militærhistorisk Renaissance?," 140.

42 Kai Vilhelm Nielsen, "En Kommentar Til 'Krigshistoriens Lære' og Krigens Historikere," *Historie/Jyske Samlinger* Ny række 1, no. 1–2 (1979): 71–74.

> application of illustrative material from history applied in an interdisciplinary education of people in a profession where this kind of illustration can help develop 'versatility, adaptability and flexibility'.[43]

For Nielsen, the study of military history offers guidance as opposed to insight, as previously described. This in turn makes the difference between military history as utilized in officer education seem stronger and makes Jespersen question the epistemology of this kind of military history:

> The question is in other words if military history should be considered nomothetic (generalizing science) or ideographic (individualizing). I am naturally of the opinion that it as an integrated part of academic history is the last. On this vital aspect I am missing a clarification from KVN [Kai Vilhelm Nielsen].[44]

To Jespersen it was unclear what kind of science military history was for Nielsen. The distinction between nomothetic and ideographic that Jespersen used was first coined by German neo-Kantian philosopher Wilhelm Windelband at the turn of the 19th century. A nomothetic science is one that deals with general laws, what is universal, whereas ideographic sciences are concerned with what once was both understood as something particular and as something that was in the past. However, this only describes the treatment of knowledge, not the actual content. The distinction has also been widely criticized and has caused confusion.[45]

The distinction was made to differentiate between the methods of natural sciences on one hand and the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*) on the other, since disciplines like psychology were using methods formerly reserved for natural science while being a science about inner human life. Windelband did not argue that all human sciences were necessarily historical. Therefore, it is useless to operate with this distinction as a tool to separate natural sciences on the one hand and social sciences

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43 Nielsen, "En Kommentar," 74.

44 Knud J. V. Jespersen, "Svar Til En Lærer i Krigshistorie," *Historie/Jyske Samlinger* 13 (1979): 76.

45 Frederick Charles Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 382.

and humanities on the other. However, the question of whether one can derive laws from military history, or one should refrain from making generalizations based on past battles remains a highly interesting question to discuss regarding the use of military history in officer education. This question is also related to the distinction between military history offering guidance or insight.

As I see it, Jespersen could, in the above quote, just as well have asked Nielsen for clarity on whether he saw military history as offering guidance or insight. Military history offering guidance, as described previously, entails the idea that warfare is governed by general laws. However, no such laws can be deducted from military history if it only offers insight. Danish military history in officer education seems to contain a sort of dualism. Different concept pairs have been used to describe this phenomenon. Besides descriptive/applied, ideographic/nomothetic, guidance/insight, the distinction consumer/producer was also used in the Danish debate. Nielsen introduced this distinction at the seminar in 1974 to make clear that he as a military history teacher of the Danish Army College was a consumer of military history rather than a producer. He describes that it is a pity that it is not possible for him as a consumer to get relevant military history that is Danish made.[46] Although these descriptions are different, they are as I view them all attempts to overcome the separation of academic history and military history as taught in officer education that happened with the professionalization of history. Looking further back to the beginning of the 20th century, teacher of military history Rolf Kall used the terms narrative and learning military history to make similar distinctions of military history.[47] This illustrates clearly that it has been a problem for military history. Although I think a lot can be learned about military history from studying these concept pairs, there might be reason to believe that the conflict between academic history and military history taught in officer education – so vivid in the 1970s Denmark with roots dating back to the professionalization of history – has diminished today.

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[46] Barnekow, Frantzen and Janson, *Hvor blev militærhistorien af?*, 28.

[47] Schøning, "Mellem Historie- Og Krigsvidenskab," 77f.

Military history today

It is my impression that since the 1970s, Danish military history as taught in officer education has in many ways followed developments in academic history. The gap between the two types of military history has shrunk in a way that it is questionable whether one even can speak of two distinct types. In a Danish context, the utility that military history offers is predominantly viewed in terms of insight rather than guidance. Additionally, within Danish academic history it has become more acceptable that history has a use.

In the last thirty years in Denmark, a new field of history that focuses on memory and the uses of pasts has been established. This is inspired by an international focus on historical consciousness and cultural memory, building on theories by among other Maurice Halbwachs, which received renewed interest in the 1970s and 1980s.[48] This theoretical field's approach to history opens up the definition of what history is. History is not only the research that takes place in history departments, in universities, and at museums. The scope broadens to include how people outside of academia use history. Following this approach, it is equally if not more interesting how ordinary people view history and how history is used in public institutions.[49] In Denmark, the reason for placing the focus on what goes on outside academic circles was explained by two of the Danish pioneers of this approach to history: history professors Claus Bryld and Bernard Eric Jensen. The two had different ways of explaining the need for academic Danish history writing to be less revolving around itself. Claus Bryld put forth the argument that since history is produced and communicated by so many people other than historians, the focus should broaden to also include how history is used in various institutions and political debates. Bernard Eric Jensen had a different viewpoint, given his history didactic background. According to Jensen, consciousness of history is a human prerequisite. It is not possible to understand

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[48] Anette Elisabeth Warring, "Erindring og Historiebrug. Introduktion til et forskningsfelt," *Temp. Tidskrift for historie* 1, no. 2 (2011): 6, 13.

[49] Warring, "Erindring og Historiebrug," 10.

human behaviour without understanding how the human thinks and uses history.[50]

According to Norwegian history theorist Helge Jordheim, looking at how history is understood outside academia makes evident that the *magistra vitae* approach to history is thriving. To most people, the notion that it is possible to learn from history is obvious.[51] Without conscious effort, most people go about their lives with the understanding that it is possible to learn from history. Jensen proves that even within Danish academic history it was difficult to completely abandon the thought. A complete rejection of the notion of *magistra vitae* had not happened in the beginning of 1911 when Danish prolific historian Kristian Erslev published his book on historical method:

> Thus, Erslev was attributing a bifurcated professional identity to the historical profession. When historians were engaged in writing history, they could continue to employ a magistra vitæ approach in order to identify usable pasts. However, when they set out to study the past in a scientific manner, they only had to concern themselves with what actually had occurred and abstain from any attempt at clarifying the ways in which knowledge of the past events could prove useful in a contemporary setting.[52]

Erslev distinguished between history writing and history research in order to include *magistra vitae* as a viable understanding of history. Erslevs successors, however, delivered a more definitive rejection of *magistra vitae.*[53] This distinction can somehow be said to be similar to the one made regarding military history.

Underlining the academic acceptance of history's use in the new historical tradition was an understanding of time inspired by the German history theorist Reinhart Koselleck, which was different from the past fixated understanding of history. With this theoretical approach, history

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50 Ibid., 8.

51 Helge Jordheim, "Historia Magistra Vitae i Det 21. Århundrede. Debatten Om Falstad," *Arr - Idéhistorisk Tidsskrift* 3, no. 4 (2009): 26.

52 Jensen, "Using a Past," 226.

53 Ibid., 227.

is not a science only about the past, but one that equally concerns the present and the future.

The way Koselleck describes the relation between the past, present and future as interchangeable, not separated, entities generates an understanding of history where it is possible to learn from the past and overcome the question of history being ideographic or nomothetic. Koselleck offers an alternative way to perceive the past. The past is relevant to the present not because history is repeating itself, nor does history have to be a nomothetic endeavour and only a tool to deduce overall and generic principles guiding the world but simply because the concepts "experience" and "expectation", according to Koselleck, "are human conditions that it is not possible to understand history without".[54] Using the concepts "space of experience and "horizon of expectation", Koselleck explains the relation of past, present and future as follows: "Experience is present past, whose events have been incorporated and can be remembered."[55] The past is therefore always present as experience. The military history studied by officers will in this sense be part of the space of experience for those officers. It does not matter if the studied past is first-hand experiences or experiences of others in the form of history. What matters is that it is remembered. As experiences are always present, so are expectations. Expectations are "(…) the future made present; it directs itself to the not-yet, to the nonexperienced, to that which is to be revealed."[56] This understanding of time signifies that learning from history takes place continuously – experience is what we bring with us to the present. Experiences also affects expectations of how the future might unfold, as expectations conversely also effect what experiences are deemed relevant. These are processes that, whether we are aware of them or not, are always part of human life.

The above theoretical approach lays the groundwork for asking exploratory questions rather than correcting the way military history is used in officer education. To the historian of this theoretical observation, it becomes interesting why military history is used as it is used. What

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[54] Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 257.

[55] Ibid., 259.

[56] Ibid.

pasts are deemed relevant? Why is it possible to learn from some pasts, while not from others? And how are these pasts related to present military strategic situations and future military conduct?

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