

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-60584-8 - Military History: Lectures Delivered at Trinity College,
Cambridge
The Hon. J. W. Fortescue
Excerpt
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LECTURE I

MILITARY HISTORY : ITS SCOPE AND DEFINITION

WHEN in the spring of the year 1913 my old College did me the honour to appoint me its first lecturer in Military History, I was obliged for the first time to ask myself seriously, What is military history? I confess that I have found it very difficult to furnish a satisfactory answer. Some would reply with a light heart that military history is the history of wars and warring. But what, in its turn, is war? It has been defined as an instrument of policy for the imposition of the will of one community upon another by force of arms. The definition is not a bad one. But *force of arms* is a very vague term, and must not be taken necessarily to imply an *armed force* in the ordinary acceptation of the words. You will remember that after the French fleet had been swept by us from the seas in 1805, Napoleon, unable to attack England by any other means, decreed the exclusion of British manufactures from the Continent, and endeavoured to ruin her by shutting her out of her markets. This he was able to do

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because his previous conquests had placed the control of many of the principal ports on the Continent in his hands. But though he strove thus to inflict his will upon England by might of arms, the armed men necessary for enforcing it were nothing more formidable than a small body of Custom-house officers. No doubt these functionaries, or some of them, carried weapons and in case of need were prepared to use them; but they cannot be considered as a military body. None the less as an act of war the Continental System was a bitter and deadly stroke, which nearly proved successful.

Is the history of the Continental System, therefore, military history? So far as concerns the invasion of Spain, Portugal and Russia to coerce those countries into the acceptance of it, undoubtedly it is. But as regards England, the power at which it was really aimed, what are we to say of it? How did we endeavour to combat it? How does any country invariably combat the commercial restrictions of any other? First by imposing retaliatory restrictions of her own, or engaging in a war of blockades or tariffs, which may be called regular commercial warfare; secondly, by the practice of smuggling, which may be called irregular commercial warfare. Is the history of a war of tariffs, then, military history? If we answer in the affirmative there is no escape from the logical conclusion that the never-

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ceasing contest between smugglers and revenue-officers in all countries is military history. Moreover, since revenue-officers are only departmental police, it follows that the external struggle between the breakers and the upholders of the law at large—between criminals and the police—is also military history. But this is to say that the history of social communities generally is military history; and I cannot think this to have been in the mind of the generous founder of the lectureship which I have the honour to hold.

But can we then lay down the general proposition that the breach—the forcible breach—of commercial regulations is not military history? I do not think we can, if we bear in mind how Spain, in virtue of a Papal bull, excluded all other nations from commerce with the new world, and how successive Englishmen for many generations insisted upon flouting her. Nor can we say that in many cases the conflict between supporters and breakers of the law is not military history. It is merely a question of degree. A fight between three drunken men and the police is a scuffle. A fight between three hundred men and the police is a riot. A fight between three hundred thousand and the police is civil war; and we cannot exclude civil war from military history, for it would mean the sacrifice, among the English-speaking race alone, of the campaigns of Cromwell,

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George Washington and Robert Lee. Altogether I think that we must abandon the attempt to define military history as the history of wars and warring. I feel tempted to ask in despair not "What is military history?" but rather "What is *not* military history?" since all history is but the record of the strife of men for the subsistence of their bodies or the prevalence of their opinions. But we must be patient for yet a little while, and try once more.

Let us begin, then, by laying it down provisionally that military history is the history of the strife of communities. This is not enough; for communities have been known before now to fight with anathemas, and such a conflict belongs rather to the domain of religious than of military history. Shall we say then that it is the history of the strife of communities for self-preservation or expansion? This is open to the obvious criticism that communities have fought and will fight again for many other objects than the two above-mentioned—for a woman, for a creed, for a principle moral or political, or even for nothing at all but from sheer force of habit. So it will be wiser for us to avoid any specification of the objects of strife, or we may find ourselves in trouble. It may be true in a sense to say that a tantrum of Madame de Pompadour cost the French their empire in North America and in India; but it is not the whole truth, nor nearly the whole truth. Even the best and

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A DEFINITION

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greatest of historians are but gropers in a thick darkness, and epigrams are the most deceitful of will-o'-the-wisps.

Let us now, as we needs must, strengthen our definition a little, and say that military history is the history of the strife of communities expressed through the conflict of organised bands of armed men. I am obliged to say *bands* of armed men so as to exclude such a case as a duel between two or more chosen champions of quarrelling communities; and I add the word *organised* so as to indicate that, below a certain stage of civilisation, there can be no military history. This is a second definition, but still imperfect; and I am afraid that I cannot yet improve it. It leaves a vast field for the survey of a lecturer, far vaster than I have the knowledge to cover; and, if Trinity should endure for another ten centuries, my successors will never want material for interesting and instructive lectures. And let no man persuade you that the subject is trivial or unimportant—that the study of war is the study of a relic of barbarism to be eschewed by the serious, the devout and the humane. I am not denying that war is a terrible—from some points of view even a hideous—thing. Since its object is to compel a number of people to do what they do not wish, by making their lives a burden to them, it must sometimes be a hideous thing. But, after all, the system

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of forcing people to observe a certain line of conduct under penalties is that upon which all human society is founded. We are all subject to it at this moment, and have been from the beginning of our lives. You remember the mother in *Punch*—“Go and see what baby is doing, and tell her she mustn’t.” “Thou shalt not” is the basis of four-fifths of the ancient code of law which is most familiar to us, and of all other codes since. But in every community there are a certain number of individuals who answer “Thou shalt not” with a resolute “I will”; and these we ostracise, or imprison, or hang. We call such people lunatics or criminals, accordingly as we consider them responsible or not responsible for their actions, and we treat them as we think that they deserve; but, if by chance their opinions should later prevail even for a time, we proclaim them apostles or martyrs. There is, in fact, always the danger that, when we think ourselves to be merely punishing a criminal, we may really be torturing a great reformer. Hence a certain proportion of folks among us shrink from this system of coercion, and would have no government at all. Others again, looking upon the existence of private property as the main reason for the existence of the policeman, would have communities share all things in common. I mention these facts to show you

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LAW AND FORCE

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that the employment of force receives from some thinkers equal condemnation, whether to impose the will of a community upon its own citizens, or upon those of some other community.

But no one on that account has ventured to stigmatize the study of penal codes, and of the organisation for putting them into force, as ignoble or unprofitable. The sheriff, for instance, and his functions are approached with respect, by some historians even with awe. "Ah," say the despisers of military history, "but the sheriff is an instrument for compelling obedience to the law, not the leader of a host whose business it is to slaughter and destroy." The law! and what is the law but the formulated will which some section of the community, possibly a majority, but always in former days and frequently, even at present, a minority, seeks to impose upon the whole? And if breakers of the law resist the sheriff or policeman, will he not if necessary slaughter them, and destroy any shelter in which they may have taken refuge? Of course he will, and "the law" will uphold him for so doing. "But," reply the objectors, "you forget that civil law is not always a mere ordinance of man; it may have the sanction of divine authority." I speak here with all reverence, but how many are the armies and the leaders that have claimed that theirs was the cause of God,

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and have fared forth to war in His name ? I am not speaking now of modern armies, though they too invariably invoke the help of the God of Battles, and call him to witness that their cause is just. Look at the Crusades on one side, look on the other at the mighty and overwhelming conquests of Islam. Look at the extinction of Christianity in North Africa ; look at the eight centuries of conflict which banished the Mohammedan faith from Spain. Look at the religious wars of Christians in Europe ; and not least at our own Puritans. Look finally at the bitter struggles of Hindu and Mohammedan in India. There was not one of these parties that did not claim, that did not for the most part heartily believe, that it was fighting to uphold the law of God.

No ! in its essence there is no difference between the force that imposes the will of a man upon his neighbour, and that which imposes his will upon his enemy. In the more primitive days of England the duties of the sheriff and his *posse comitatus* extended to foreign enemies on English soil as well as to domestic law-breakers. Do we not to this day speak of those guilty of acts of violence as *breakers of the King's Peace* ; men, that is, who seek to bring about a state of war and must be suppressed by the methods of war—taken prisoners, wounded or unwounded, and in the last resort killed ? What was

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I] POLICE AND SOLDIERS 9

the origin of our own standing army? It was formed, as you doubtless know, out of a remnant of the victorious army of the Parliament which had overthrown the monarchy, a remnant which was saved from disbandment in order to overawe the turbulent of London, or in other words to serve as a body of police. It continued to be the only efficient instrument for imposing the will of the Government upon the people until 1829, when the present police-force was established. And the police are a standing army, neither more or less. The only essential difference between police and soldiers is that the former are employed mainly in the coercion of subjects of the State which levies them, while the function of the latter is to coerce the subjects of foreign states. It would not be inaccurate to say that police are soldiers against domestic enemies, and an army police against foreign enemies.

And now observe that we have found a second definition of military history. It is the history of the external police of communities and nations. But external police, you may object, implies the existence of something which, for want of a better word, we must call external law. Is there such a thing as external law? There is a thing called the law of nations or international law, which is concerned chiefly, though not exclusively, with the

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relations between belligerents and neutrals, but which is simply custom, and should not be called law, because there is no international police to enforce it. Any nation may defy it, if she thinks it worth while, and a great many have defied it in the past and will defy it in the future, not necessarily with any damage to themselves. The same may be said of the International Tribunal of Arbitration at the Hague. Its decrees and decisions may be excellent, and nations may bind themselves beforehand to accept them; but nations are not remarkable for the observance of inconvenient agreements, where there is no penalty for violating them. It is a painful fact, but in its relations to its neighbours every community is a law unto itself, the nature of that law being principally determined by the community's powers of enforcement. Police first, law afterwards, is the rule between nation and nation—a formula which may be rendered more tersely still by the phrase, *Might is Right*. In a sense, therefore, though not in the sense generally attached to the words, military history is the history of the law of nations, which is the law of force; or, if you prefer it, of the law of force which is the law of nations.

A revolting thought, perhaps some of you will say! Have all the efforts of countless generations of good and holy men to seek peace and ensue it, resulted in no greater success than this? Let us