

# Studying Military History

According to military historian Saul David: 'Given that the recent tempo of military operations for British and US forces is higher than it has been at any time since the Falkland and Vietnam Wars, the study of military history has never been more relevant.' In this four-page supplement on military history options in higher education, we asked four university-based military historians to address some central questions: what is the relevance of military history to the modern world, why should any student choose it as their main subject, and what is the special attraction of their own institution? Here are the answers we received.

## Professor Chris Bellamy Greenwich Maritime Institute, University of Greenwich

Since the dawn of history, the seas and oceans have been the route for communication and trade between and within civilisations. Seafarers' needs have constantly driven advances in astronomy, geography, navigation, science, technology, medicine, nutrition – and warfare.

There can be no better place to study the oceans, war and trade, and their pivotal place in human development than the Greenwich Maritime Institute at the University of Greenwich. Situated at the world's centre of longitude and time, the Institute is housed in the former Royal Naval College, designed by architect and astronomer Christopher Wren, and is the heart of these islands' maritime heritage and naval tradition.

In the 21st century, Greenwich remains the ideal place to study maritime matters, past, present, and future. The Institute and the Greenwich maritime campus are close to Docklands, where much of the world's shipping industry is centred, to the City of London, home of Lloyd's, marine insurance, maritime finance, and to the International Maritime Organisation at Westminster – the UN Agency responsible for all maritime matters.

The Greenwich Maritime Institute has close links with all these organisations. Its programmes are designed to allow students the fullest possible interaction with practitioners in their chosen field through field visits and nurturing personal contacts. The MA in Maritime History offers unique access not only to eminent maritime historians but also to the National Maritime Museum just across the road.

The Institute has a strong naval focus, with two professors who are winners of the Westminster Medal for Military Literature, but focuses equally on the interrelated story of the merchant marine. For those with more contemporary interests, there are the MA in International Maritime Policy and the MBA Maritime Management. And, starting in September 2012 and accepting applicants now, there is the new MSc in Maritime Security – the first degree of its kind in the world. The Institute will accept students without a first degree if they have relevant professional experience. For specialised research there is also an MA by Research in Maritime Studies, and higher research degrees – MPhil and PhD – in any area.



Building on its worldwide reputation in maritime history, policy, and management, the Institute is also widening its remit to cover modern maritime security, energy, and the environment. GMI is an extraordinarily diverse international community, united by one all-pervading passion – the sea and the maritime environment.



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## Jonathan Boff University of Birmingham

**W**hy study military history? From Thucydides until the 19th century, if you wanted to study history, you did not have much choice: all history was military history. Now, however, multiple complementary (and sometimes competing!) subdisciplines within history make this a valid question. Personally, I think there are four reasons: because it may help us understand the present;

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because it is a powerful lens through which to see the past; because it is hard; and because it is fun.

Trotsky famously described war as ‘the locomotive of history’. It has raised up kings and thrown down empires, spread ideas and religions around the world, and destroyed faith. It has made heroes of some, villains of others, and fools of many. Can we understand our world without understanding the violent forces which created it? Military history might help us do that, not only in the realm of power politics, but also of the culture which surrounds us daily. Would we laugh at Armstrong and Miller’s street-talking RAF pilots without endless wet Sunday afternoons watching old wartime dramas?

There is more to the study of war, however, than just refighting old battles and telling us how we got here. Warfare has been central to human experience from the walls of Troy to the streets of Sangin. Military history opens a window into that experience and offers a powerful multi-disciplinary analytic tool. Let me give you two examples.

First, the physical, intellectual, and moral challenges of war allow us to see deep into the heart of Humanity. Observe men and women under stress, and you see them warts and all. Second, how militaries act teaches us much about the societies and cultures in which they have their roots. The best modern military history draws on a huge range of disciplines, from art history to statistics via economics, psychology, sociology, and moral philosophy, to study war in all its aspects.

Military history, though, is difficult. War is, by its very nature, an extremely complex phenomenon. It continually evolves; there are numberless moving parts; the evidence is often partial in every sense; and it can, on occasion, be depressing – a relentless catalogue of humanity’s evil towards humanity.

It can, however, sometimes be uplifting to find humanity in the midst of horror. And it is never dull. As Thomas Hardy wrote, ‘War makes rattling good history, but Peace is poor reading.’

## Dr Julian P Haseldine University of Hull

Conflict is one of the greatest drivers of change in any society, affecting in fundamental ways everything from the pace of technological change to political constitutions and cultural identities. At Hull, we believe that the significance of war in shaping the world as we know it makes the study of armed conflicts from all periods of history relevant.

If current conflicts involving the West and the Middle East arise from the post-Second World War settlements in Israel, Palestine, and Iraq, for example, they are, in equally important ways, rooted in the Crusades or in ideas about the relationship between religion and warfare engendered by the Thirty Years War.

The Department of History at Hull has a long-established tradition of military history, integral to its undergraduate syllabus for many years, and now developed further through its new MA programme in Military History. We have the expertise among our staff to offer our students the opportunity to study the changing character of war across many periods and regions.

Dr Andrew Ayton's work on the English military community, to which a generation of PhD students have now contributed valuable studies, has not only transformed our view of the Medieval military revolution, but gone on to show how military service has shaped and defined the character of the English. Professor Peter Wilson's recent bestselling work on the Thirty Years War, *Europe's Tragedy*, arises from his work challenging conventional assumptions about the nature of 'religious war'.

From in-depth studies like these, our students are led to consider and debate concepts such as 'religious war' and 'total war', and to explore the impact of war on cultural and national identities. In the context of modern conflicts, members of the department have conducted ground-breaking research into many of these questions. Both Dr Jenny Macleod's important new interpretation of the cultural impact of Gallipoli and Dr David Omissi's work on Indian soldiers on the Western Front in the First World War reveal important new dimensions of the inner dynamics of empire and nationhood, and their transformation through warfare.

Students are taught together for two core modules, covering the fundamentals of military history and its historiography, looking at the great contributors to the discipline past and present. They then choose from a range of optional modules, and are also assigned to an individual research supervisor for their dissertation.

The MA in Military History not only, in this way, offers students access to leading historical researchers working across a very wide chronological span, but also, through the university's postgraduate module-sharing arrangements, the opportunity to combine historical approaches with those of strategic studies through modules offered by the Politics and International Studies Department.



## Your chance to make history

### MA in Military History

Join us as we explore some of the most pivotal moments in military history. Ideal for graduates and history enthusiasts alike, this fascinating course seeks to explain why wars occur, with discussions ranging from the formation of armies, navies and weaponry, to the progression of military strategy, defence and politics.

It's designed to advance your knowledge and research skills in the political, strategic and cultural history of war and human conflict. As part of the course, you'll select a dissertation topic of your choice, and you'll be assigned your own research supervisor to help with your studies.

Department staff include Dr Andrew Ayton, co-author of *The Battle of Crécy 1346*, Professor Peter Wilson, author of the bestselling *Europe's Tragedy: A History of the Thirty Years War*, and Dr Jenny Macleod, author of *Reconsidering Gallipoli*.

This is your chance to make history at the University of Hull.  
To find out more and apply, contact [j.p.haseldine@hull.ac.uk](mailto:j.p.haseldine@hull.ac.uk)

### Military History at Hull

We have a long-established tradition of research excellence in military history. Recent and current students have worked on topics from iron-age weaponry to the current Afghanistan conflict. We are also renowned for our strong research expertise in the English military community of the 14th century, the Thirty Years War, the eighteenth century global wars for empire, British imperial forces, especially India, and World Wars I and II.



## Saul David University of Buckingham

Given that the recent tempo of military operations for British and US forces is higher than it has been at any time since the Falkland and Vietnam Wars, the study of military history has never been more relevant. We learn from history that war has been the chief driver for most forms of political, social, economic, and technological change, and that a thorough understanding of its causes, courses, and consequences is the surest way to avoid unnecessary conflict in the future.

Of course, war, in one form or another, is here to stay whether we like it or not. Which is why the study of military history is so important. It enables us – academics, politicians, and soldiers alike – to view current conflict from a historical perspective, so that, in an ideal world, we can learn from both the blunders and the successes of the past.

Some laws are immutable: the need for adequate planning, training, and resupply; for politicians to leave the business of fighting to the professionals; and for military commanders not to underestimate their foe. Yet, at the same time, every war is slightly different: fought with different weapons, in a different terrain, and with different political objectives. We can draw conclusions from military history, but there is no blueprint for success (or, at least, the avoidance of defeat). Military history can give us only a series of pointers on what to do and not to do.

On the other hand, the study of military history – all history, for that matter – is a very inexact science. There is no ‘answer’ to any of the great historical questions – only hazy reconstructions



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of the past based on analysis of the best sources available. Which is what makes the discipline of history in general – and military history in particular – so exciting.

Military history matters, and every serious student of history, from a don at Oxbridge to a research student at Buckingham, can make his or her contribution, large or small, to this constant dialogue with the past. The only certainty about the research and writing of history is that it is never definitive, never the final word. For me, that makes the job of a military historian – with all its relevance to current events – the best in the world.



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