

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT FOR MILITARY HISTORY AND EDUCATION

By Ian Li

ABSTRACT

According to the author, military history as a field has significant benefits to military education, but, it should be properly contextualised. He feels that for there to be any meaningful interpretation, accounts must be critically analysed to understand the perspectives in which they have been written and the assumptions that inherently underlie them, particularly those that arise from the particular piece being written for the specific purpose of nation-building or education. Ideally, a healthy variety of perspectives are used in conjunction with one another so that the reader is presented with a complete picture of the event with which to then form his own interpretations and conclusions.

Keywords: *Propaganda, accuracy, interpretation, Perspective, Understanding*

INTRODUCTION

The field of military history is not new, but it has not always enjoyed widespread recognition in academia.¹ Military history after all did not originate in academia, and still continues to be produced by authors that fall outside traditional academic circles. One of the main reasons for this is that apart from being merely a record of historical events, military history has traditionally taken on other non-academic applications. For example, the British military historian Sir Michael E. Howard in a 1961 lecture highlighted the appropriation of military history by political elites for propaganda purposes, thus becoming a tool of national myth-making.² In this context, the historical accuracy of the record is less important than the message it is supposed to convey. Military history must therefore be understood in its context and this essay looks at how certain factors affect the interpretation and understanding of military history, particularly for the purpose of military education.

MILITARY HISTORY AS NATIONAL MYTH-MAKING

The use of military history in national myth-making is not an uncommon occurrence, and is often used to supplement efforts at nation-building. The Israeli academic, Yael 'Yuli' Tamir highlighted the connection between national myth-making and nation-

building, arguing that the truth-content of historical claims in the context of national-building is secondary to their functional role of creating a desired national identity.³ To be sure, this is equally true of other historical fields, but the evocative nature of past military glories, imagined or otherwise, and their ability to galvanise the population adds to the seductive allure that military history holds for aspiring nationalists. It is little surprise then that many of the hastily-formed states that emerged in the wake of decolonisation, while bearing little internal coherence, fell back upon military history to drive nation-building.

For example, Tan Sri Dol Ramlı's history of the Malay Regiment which was published in 1965 played up the Regiment's achievements during the Malayan campaign in World War II (WWII), alluding to an inherent *Malay* martial tradition while also embracing the Regiment's colonial roots.⁴ These decisions were taken in the context of the time. In 1965, the Federation of Malaysia was still relatively young, formed only two years earlier under the auspices of the British.⁵ It was also the same year that the Chinese-majority Singapore seceded from the Federation under less than amicable circumstances.⁶ The Regiment with its heroic past and its subsequent involvement in combating the predominantly Chinese-led communist insurgency during the Malayan Emergency therefore became a convenient symbol of Malay unity, and was embraced

as such by the ruling United Malays Nationalist Organisation (UMNO), whose vision of Malaysia was as a multicultural society, but one anchored nonetheless by the majority Malay community.⁷ At the same time, the Regiment and the martial theme it embodied became a highly symbolic expression of Malay empowerment that was so desperately needed at the time for the seemingly embattled Malay community, economically overshadowed as they were by the Chinese minority.⁸ Therefore, the Regiment's war exploits became not only a national source of pride, but were also representative of the struggles of the Malay race.⁹

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Nonetheless, against the backdrop of the Cold War, the fledgling Malaysian state was still dependent on British military assistance to defend it against the predations of its hostile communist neighbours, particularly Indonesia.¹⁰ Similarly, Britain feared that the collapse of Malaysia would have a domino-like effect throughout the rest of Southeast Asia.¹¹ The Regiment's historical connection with the British was therefore useful in promoting this mutually-beneficial partnership. Furthermore, the newly independent Malaysia was a modern construct brought together only as a result of British colonial rule. With its disparate mix of communities, it was inherently rife with cultural and ethnic tensions.¹² The idea of a unified Malaysia was therefore very much the imagined community as alluded to by Benedict Anderson.¹³ Given the importance of creating narratives to bind together a nation, in particular through the appropriation of an illustrious tradition, whether correctly or otherwise, the Regiment's legacy was too valuable a propaganda asset not to seize upon for the purpose of nation-building.¹⁴

The difficulty herein is therefore how to separate reality from myth, a process complicated by the fact that many a time, even the myths themselves contain

an element of truth. Official documents, for example, may be intentionally embellished in order to present a more palatable narrative or omit information that is assumed to be common knowledge for the intended audience, often officials and politicians.¹⁵ For many, the myth has also become so ingrained in the collective memory that it becomes mentally jarring when it is exposed.¹⁶ For example, would the message of Malay empowerment as embodied by the Regiment be as potent if one was to draw emphasis to its ultimate failure at halting the Japanese advance—and if not, what impact would it then have on the Malay psyche?¹⁷ There is also the question of the extent to which the myth should be debunked. After all, the myth serves a practical function to certain audiences. For the soldier, the idealised depiction of war is able to sustain him when thrown into the crucible of battle, guiding him in the way he *should* at least behave even when he is confronted by its horrors.¹⁸ Howard termed this particular application of military history as 'nursery history', but this was not meant in a disparaging way.¹⁹ Rather, it was a practical form of application borne out of necessity.



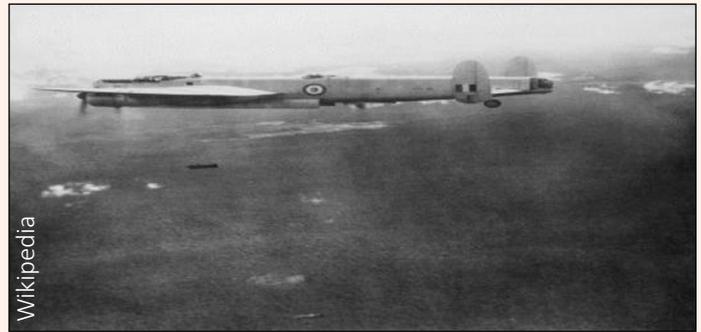
Workers on a rubber plantation in Malaya travel to work under the protection of Special Constables, whose function was to guard them throughout the working day against attack by communist forces, 1950.

MILITARY HISTORY AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL

Another common application of military history is as an educational tool for military professional.²⁰ Here, its objective is to provide explanations for strategic decisions and movements in order to educate future planners. As a result, such forms of military history are

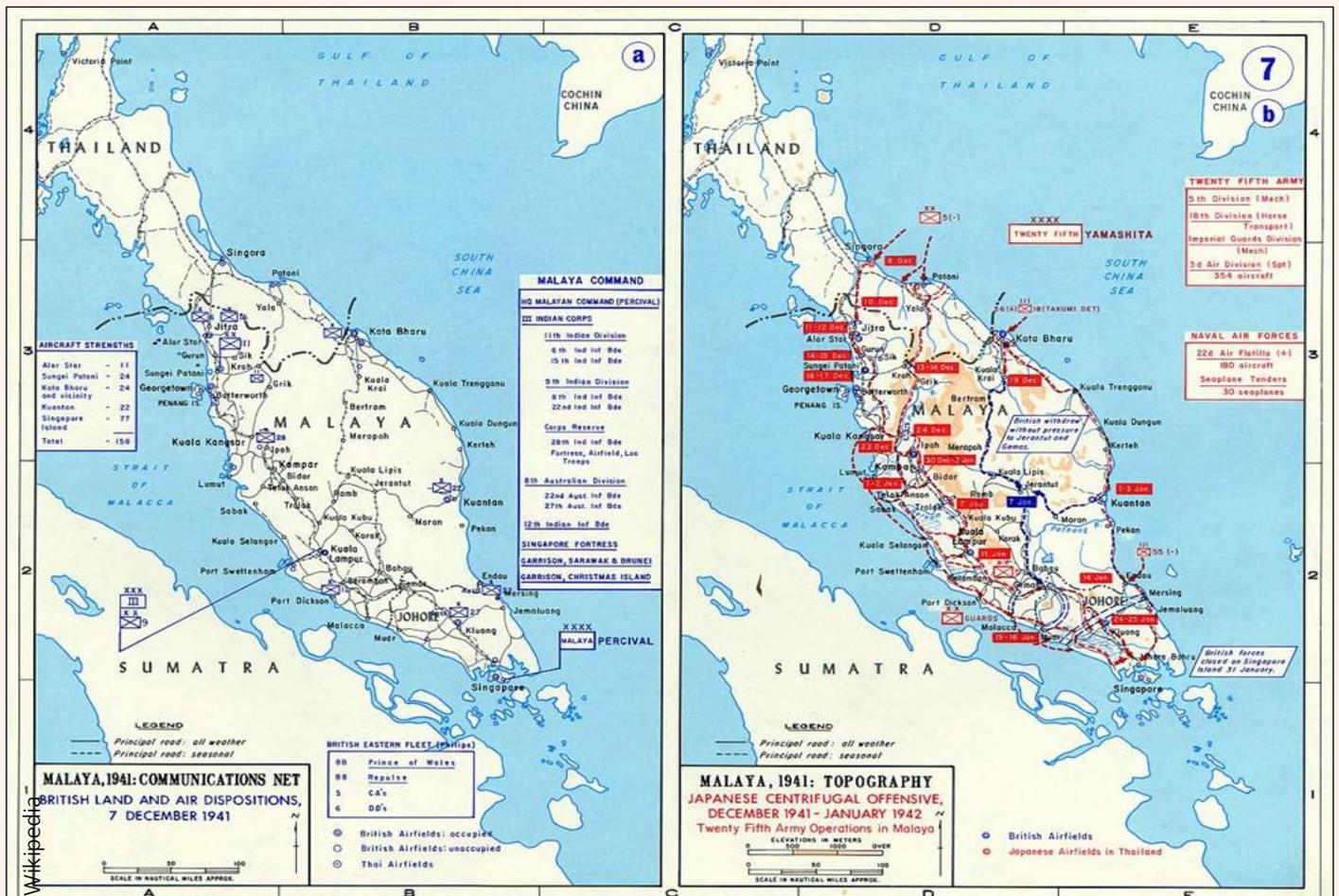
typically academic in nature and written in a top-down style from the perspective of the Staff College mind, focusing on command decisions at the strategic level and with the combat unit as the lowest common denominator for analysis.²¹ There are a number of implications for this.

First, in order to come up with broad explanations for what are in reality complex scenarios, military history written for educational purposes often glosses over the impact of battlefield confusion, particularly at the tactical and operational levels.²² As highlighted by Clausewitz in his treatise on war, ‘everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult.’²³ These are due to the countless uncertainties and complexities that are inherently part and parcel of waging war under chaotic field conditions. This ‘friction’ then is what distinguishes real war from war on paper.²⁴ The charge against educational military history is therefore its over-simplification into basic or simple truths which are far from representation of complex realities.²⁵



Australian Avro Lincoln bomber dropping 500lb bombs on communist rebels in the Malayan jungle (c. 1950)

Second, this top-down version of military history ignores the agency of one of the main actors in any conflict—the boots on the ground. By focusing on high-level strategic decision-making, war is reduced to an account of the actions of faceless blocs of men, commandeered by generals like pieces on a chessboard.²⁶ This failure to capture the myriad of individual experiences that accompany each conflict adds to the charge of unrealism levelled against this form of military history. The value of an army’s fighting quality becomes solely attributed to the proficiency of its leaders, ignoring the contributions of its other no less significant components.²⁷ In the accounts of ground



Map of the Malayan campaign.



Australian anti-tank gunners firing on Japanese tanks at the Muar-Parit Sulong Road.

operations, less attention is given to individual experiences apart from describing the critical actions taken by commanders at a tactical level. There is therefore an emotional distance from the events being described, making it hard to connect with them at a personal level.

Of course, in reality military education does not focus exclusively on top-down histories, and personal accounts are represented in one form or the other. However, for a complete picture to be presented, more ground-level perspectives could be weaved to work in conjunction with strategic-level analyses, and such personal ‘face of battle’ accounts, including those provided by combat veterans, are readily available.²⁸ Such accounts allow the reader to better appreciate the unnerving chaos that is experienced in battle. Caution must however be exercised in the selection of such sources. ‘Face of battle’ accounts, particularly those based on oral histories, are ultimately *personal* accounts and their representativeness of the broader population cannot be assumed.²⁹ Furthermore, an individual’s personal experience can only be but a drop in the ocean of the collective narrative.³⁰

Neither are these accounts immune to the individual’s personal bias or lapses in memory, whether intentional or otherwise.³¹ For example, Colonel Masanobu Tsuji’s own first-hand account of the Malayan campaign, which provides a valuable glimpse into the campaign from a rare Japanese point-of-view, is nonetheless skewed in Japan’s favour.³² He portrays the Japanese intentions behind the capture of Singapore

as part of a campaign to liberate Asia from Western colonisation; one which he then suggests helped to subsequently bring about independence in many former colonies.³³ This claim is contentious at best, especially in light of the substantive record of Japanese war crimes committed not only against military personnel during the war, but also civilians.³⁴ The difficulty in validating individual accounts exacerbates this problem.³⁵

In the accounts of ground operations, less attention is given to individual experiences apart from describing the critical actions taken by commanders at a tactical level. There is therefore an emotional distance from the events being described, making it hard to connect with them at a personal level.

It is also tempting to assume that a soldier’s personal account is the most authoritative point of reference. Often, a retired military professional ‘uses the credibility of both his military experience and his advertisable rank’ to lend greater authority to his version of historical events.³⁶ Also, by virtue of ‘being there’, his witness account claims a superior level of authenticity, relegating the accounts of other authors who lack that first-hand experience to the status of mere pretenders.³⁷ Yet, in addition to the problems with personal accounts as highlighted above, the soldier is highly susceptible to professional myopia, often using his occupational expertise to over-compensate for a lack of academic rigour.³⁸ Personal accounts, when deprived of their cultural and social context, offer only a one-dimensional portrayal of events.

Furthermore, there is a growing understanding that the study of military history cannot just be confined to war itself—war and its causal factors are deeply

intertwined with social factors and affected by structures and constraints imposed by the society its armed forces are embedded in.³⁹ A deeper study of all the extra-military factors that govern the relationship between the armed forces and society is therefore needed to fully understand how and why war is waged.⁴⁰ David Edgerton's *Warfare State* for example examines the socio-political factors that drove Britain's military planning from 1920 to 1970 rather than provide a 'blood and guts' account of the conflicts it was involved in.⁴¹

Ultimately, there must be a compromise between both approaches.⁴² The historical account conceptualised in academic terms must be tempered by the soldier's professional insight in order to be useful for education.⁴³ At the same time, the soldier's personal account must be contextualised using an academic perspective for any meaningful application to be derived. When this is achieved, the history then serves to broaden the professional scope of the military professional, informing military innovation in peacetime and adaptation in war.⁴⁴ Besides, for all its problems, history remains the best alternative to actually experiencing war for the military professional to hone his trade.⁴⁵ The caveat though is that military history must be *studied* rather than merely read in order for the military professional to reap its full benefits.⁴⁶

THE ISSUE WITH PERSPECTIVE

One of the significant challenges that affects the understanding of military history is the critique of Eurocentrism.⁴⁷ This occurs at two levels. Conceptually, many of the definitions and frameworks that define the field are Western in origin.⁴⁸ For example, the writings of Clausewitz continue to dominate modern strategic thought, and the inevitable outcome is that military history becomes overly interpreted using Western lenses.⁴⁹ This is especially pertinent given how influential Clausewitz is within Western military academies, in turn colouring the perspectives of military professionals and how they interpret military history. As a result, other civilizational and cultural perspectives are ignored, presenting an incomplete version of how war is understood and defined.⁵⁰

In the Western tradition, there is a tendency to interpret war in the context of the international state system, assigning it a legal and political character. It is for this reason that Western countries have at times taken pains to avoid the term war when engaged in controversial conflicts.⁵¹ This raises questions over how conflicts which are not interstate in nature, such as civil wars and insurgencies, or which involve non-state actors, such as the Islamic State or Private Military Companies (PMCs), should be interpreted.

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In terms of emphasis, historical accounts tend to lean toward Western perspectives, portraying Western militaries as the active, often protagonist-like, lead actors. Where the 'non-West' is depicted, it is as faceless opponents of these Western combatants, supporting actors whose military cultures and motivations are entirely glossed over and whose warfighting capabilities are downplayed or given scant attention to.⁵² National histories are equally guilty of this, such as Lionel Wigmore's commissioned work on Australia's involvement in WWII during the initial phase of Japan's advance into Southeast Asia.⁵³ A possible reason for this is the challenge an author faces in interpreting or even being able to read sources in the language of the other culture.⁵⁴ Of course, another more cynical explanation is that presenting a more balanced narrative does not coincide with the objectives of an intentional exercise in national myth-making.

These distinctions are however not helpful since war has a universal quality that transcends cultures and civilisations. Clausewitz, for example, suggests that the nature of war does not change.⁵⁵ Rather, it is war's characteristics which adapt to the limiting conditions and peculiar preconceptions of each age.⁵⁶ The strategic

theorist Colin Gray summarises this idea well when he says that there is 'only a single general theory of war, because war—past, present, and future—is but a single species of subject.'⁵⁷ By ignoring the greater range of perspectives that exists outside of Eurocentric ones, one is presented with a far more limited and unrealistic interpretation of military history, leading to the drawing of erroneous, inaccurate or oversimplified conclusions. This in turn misinforms the reader who might develop a coloured portrait of events. For the military professional who relies on military history for education, the result of such misinformation can have catastrophic results were it to be translated into the planning or execution of strategy.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, military history as a field has significant benefits to military education, but must be properly contextualised. For there to be any meaningful interpretation, accounts must be critically analysed to understand the perspectives in which they have been written and the assumptions that inherently underlie them, particularly those that arise from the particular piece being written for the specific purpose of nation-building or education. Ideally, a healthy variety of perspectives are used in conjunction with each other so that the military professional is presented with a complete picture of the event with which to then form his own interpretations and conclusions.

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