“NEW” MILITARY HISTORY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR. ACHIEVEMENTS AND LIMITS

Jiří Hutečka

Over recent decades, “new military history” has become a mainstream concept in the historical study of warfare. The article attempts to summarize how this concept has changed our understanding of the First World War, including all the main areas of research it has covered over the years, and focuses on the issue of a “missing link” in the study of conflicts through the lenses of both “new” and “old” military histories – that is, that violence and combat, which are the ultimate focus of every war effort, remain largely left out of the picture current historiographical work paints. Identifying this problem within the context of the historiography of the First World War, the text offers a brief insight into its origins and suggests some possible remedies.

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Jiří Hutečka is a Lecturer at the Institute of History of the Faculty of Arts at the University in Hradec Králové.

“Old” and “New” Military History

The field known as “military history” has always held a peculiar position in the historical profession. Devoted to the study of warfare, broadly understood as a more or less organized violent conflict with the aim of imposing one group’s will over the will of others, it has always tended to be interconnected with the very institution it aspired to analyze, i.e. the military. What often resulted was not only much ire and suspicion from the mainstream scholarly community rooted in the generally pacifist environment of the universities, but also a somewhat simplified, utilitarian vision of the past, which was seen either as supplying the “traditions” of “the glorious past” to these institutions, or as a sort of “pot” of lessons deemed necessary for practicing war successfully in the future.
Consequently, military history has a tendency either to follow the dictum that “war is a continuation of politics by other means”, simplifying military operations into projections of political power, or to go the other way and disentangle these operations from all the context and constraints of their cultural, societal, economic and political environment, creating a virtual laboratory of so-called “operational history”. Reaching all the way back to the classical works of authors such as Hans Delbrück, J. F. C. Fuller, or Basil Liddell-Hart, the best adherents to this approach have helped explain an important facet of the way wars were thought of, fought, and experienced by societies in the past. On the other hand, though, the more widespread works of “battleology”, focused on obsessing over tactics, campaigns, great leaders, unit histories and weaponry, are limited in their potential to inspire historical knowledge. While this did not prevent the field from filling endless bookstore shelves titled “Military History”, whose popularity with the reading public makes the average historian cringe with ill-concealed jealousy, this approach has all but ignored the individual experience of the majority of participants in historical conflicts, including even soldiers themselves, focusing instead on stories of great men and their rationalized actions.

This traditional form of military history has always been regarded as a specific niche of little interest to “true” historians, who have tended to look upon its practitioners with a condescending smile at best. As John Lynn recounted in his famous lament over the state of military history at US universities in the late 1990s, “we used to be condemned because we were believed to be politically right-wing, morally corrupt, or just plain dumb.” “Uninspiring” and “intellectually limited” were some of the more positive adjectives used in connection with military history, with “male-dominated” and “celebrating male aggression”, added during the 1970s. While Lynn’s assessment may seem to be a little over-the-top, I was once told myself by a noted professor of Central European history at one of the leading US universities that “military history is just for hobbyists and ‘buffs’”, and the situation in Europe has hardly been any more promising in terms of the field becoming generally accepted among academic historians.

For many military historians, the obvious solution was to shut themselves up in a ghetto that, over time, had become somewhat self-imposed. Scholarly

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study of military history became a retreat for those who saw themselves to be “different” from the mainstream, perhaps even accepting the reality behind the quip that “military history is to history what military music is to music”. This situation is perhaps no better illustrated than with the case of the Czech historical profession, in which military history pegged itself into a position almost completely isolated from the trends, discourses, and paradigmatic shifts in the wider, radically changing field. In 2002, Ivan Šedivý commented that “Czech military historians generally ignored the dynamic changes the study of warfare had experienced in the worldwide context (…) losing touch with the best of the local historiography as well”, and I have fully agreed with him in the past. Unfortunately, after sixteen years, the situation has hardly improved. The only institution in the country fully dedicated to the study of military history – the Military History Institute in Prague – has become institutionally “militarized” and fully subject to the needs of the Czech Army, retreating to its inter-war roots and turning itself into a museum perpetuating the “glorified past” of the Czechoslovak military. Methodologically, it has become entrenched in a historicist-positivist, unrepentantly descriptive approach. At the same time, while the general scholarly community in the Czech republic has experienced rapid evolution, becoming increasingly interconnected with the global community in terms of methodology, publication efforts, and personal connections, it has – for the most part – remained detached from themes connected to the history of warfare. Consequently, only a few “civilian” historians, often representing a younger gen-


7 The best example of this issue is the scholarly journal *Historie a vojenství* [History and Warfare], published by the Institute for Military History in Prague, which fails to depart from the traditional, somewhat antiquarian discourse typical of this field in the Czech Republic. It did, however, include a brief summary of recent trends in English-language historiography of warfare a few years ago. See DALIBOR VÁCHA, Nový pohled na staré potíže? Dějiny válek moderní doby v anglosaské historiografii od 90. let 20. století do současnosti [A New Look at Old Issues? The History of Modern Warfare in Anglo-Saxon Historiography from the 1990s until Today], Historie a vojenství 62/2013, no. 4, pp. 4–17.
eration of scholars looking for fresh methodological approaches to the study of the past, have brought some of the discursive debates reverberating throughout the wider profession into the “fogs” of Czech historiography of warfare.

As a result, Marie Koldinská and Ivan Šedivý approached the topic of war in Czech history in their ambitious – and almost inevitably flawed – synthesis, taking their inspiration from social and cultural history, and ended up arguing that the “low-level militarization” of Czech society throughout the past centuries had a key role in forming Czech attitudes towards warfare. A few years ago, Vítězslav Prchal followed upon his editorship of a collection of papers exploring the potential of “ego-documents” in military history (mostly in Bohemia and Moravia) with an inspired cultural analysis of warfare and its role in the representative strategies adopted by the early modern Bohemian and Moravian aristocracy. Miroslav Žitný has brought discursive analysis rooted in gender history into the study of early modern aristocratic warrior imagery. Petr Wohlmuth has effectively proven that cultural anthropology is indeed a useful tool that may help us understand the performative quality of violence beyond the grisly realities of 18th century siegcraft; moreover, he has done so by analyzing the infamous siege of Bergen-op-Zoom in 1747, successfully transcending the limits of Central European historiography in the process. Michael Viktořík’s efforts have introduced some of the classical “war and society” approach (see below) into the Czech historiography of 19th century fortifications and their social as well as military reality. Dalibor Váchá has touched on the methodology of Alltags-

geschichte in his more traditionally-minded study of the Czechoslovak legion in Russia.  

To complete this list, I have recently introduced my own fresh take on military history with a study of Czech soldiers in the Austro-Hungarian armed forces during the Great War. Methodologically inspired by gender history, it has tried to skip over the old nationalized perspective, seeing its subjects as men turned soldiers first, and Czechs only in distant second place. The resulting insight – using the lens of the soldiers’ personal accounts – into how their masculine identity changed under the strain of war, and the way that process influenced their morale, motivation, and even loyalty, may well be important not just for our understanding of this particular group of actors, but also for our understanding of the connections between war, masculinity and gender in general. In the context of Czech historiography of warfare, my text followed in the footsteps of Rudolf Kučera, who has argued for the importance of masculinity, as an analytical category, for our understanding of the two world wars, and applied a similar approach himself to uncover the gendered social pressure experienced by working class people in Bohemia during the First World War.  

These discursive debates represent an offshoot of the “dynamic changes” mentioned by Ivan Šedivý in 2002, which are usually summed up using the oft-used (and perhaps oft-abused) and decidedly hazy and vague term “new military history”. Twelve years ago, British historian Joanna Bourke opened a historiographic essay with the poignant observation that “the term ‘new military hist-


‘tory’ is a misnomer.” Indeed: what is known as “new military history” in the history of warfare has its roots firmly planted in the mid-1960s when, as another great historian put it, the “Vietnam generation” of Western scholars tried to find a new way of understanding and analyzing warfare in its historical context. A projection of the general developments in the historical profession, this effort was characterized by a major shift away from events and great men towards structures, social history, the “holy trinity” of class, race, and gender, and, from the late 1980s onwards, towards “new” cultural history. Reflecting politics in the academia, this new military history more or less built its case on the existing opposition to traditional military history – while it is extremely difficult to define what exactly the discourse includes today, it is much more easily defined by what it does not: the supposedly “old-fashioned” study of tactics, campaigns, leaders, weapons, and logistics.

This “new” military history established itself as a dominant discourse in the field during the 1970s and 1980s, and somewhat successfully bridged the gap between the “academic” and “military” histories, although it did so not so much by drawing military historians out of their metaphorical ghetto but rather by bringing more mainstream historians into the study of warfare. In a more or less conscious opposition to the traditional approach, seen as limiting and insufficient for the reasons listed above, these authors embarked upon researching warfare and conflict differently. Instead of focusing narrowly on combat and operations, they embraced the study of conflict as a whole, focusing on anything even remotely connected to it, “the rest of military history – that is (...) the recruitment, training, and socialization of personnel, combat motivation, the effects of service and war on the individual soldier, the veteran, the internal dynamics of military institutions, inter- and intra-service tensions, civil-military relations, and the relationship between military systems and the greater society.”

The resulting emphasis on the social and cultural preconditions, effects, and consequences of warfare came to be seen as the true path to understanding its role in the past. While military institutions often remained the focus of this

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research, they came to be seen as instruments or reflections of larger societal structures, increasingly studied with the help of a new vocabulary of class, race, gender, identity, individual experience and memory. In this context, the event of war remained the prime mover, the ultimate *raison d'être*, but it gradually left the stage to be replaced by whatever preceded it or came out of it. The essence of war as defined by Clausewitz – organized violence between armed groups – was skipped (rather than re-visited with a new, inspiring lens) in favour of studying its structural background and the causes and consequences of the destruction it brought about, in particular casualties both real and symbolic.20 In its most limited variant, as exemplified by the seminal work by André Corvisier on the French army during the ancien régime, this approach amounted to a “war and society” concept focused on armies as social institutions and, in the scathing words of John Lynn, “worked best in a freeze frame (...) [seeing] war [as] a confusing complication in the study of military history”.21 In a more general sense, it is perhaps best to summarize the shifts towards “new military history” as a move from “military history” to a “history of war and warfare”.

While this discursive shift potentially saved military history from ultimate “ghettoization” at the fringes of the historical profession – as we have unfortunately witnessed here in the Czech Republic – it did, as all such shifts do, bring its own problems. While focusing on virtually everything connected to warfare, ever expanding into areas previously deemed irrelevant to it, “new” military history not only became a term lazily thrown in more or less every time a text does not “do” the “old military history”, but also caused some surprising “casualties” in the process. To analyze this issue more specifically in a short essay, it is necessary to narrow our point of reference, as the whole of “new military history” would be unmanageable. For this purpose, we will first summarize the past fifty years of research on the First World War, giving particular attention to works dealing with Central Europe whose authors subscribe, one way or another, to the concept of “new military history”. Then, using this area of research as an example, we will try to pinpoint the aforementioned discursive “casualties”.

New Military Histories of the Great War

Picking the Great War as a testing ground for “new military history” is not just a reflection of my own scholarly interest and preferences. The study of the global conflict of 1914 to 1918 has been one of the primary grounds of the changes we have so far described in general terms, and the first steps in “new military history” can be traced back to a few key works in this field. As Jay Winter summarized, it was John Keegan and his *The Face of Battle* (1976) which “opened a new chapter in the study of military history as a humane discipline”.22 The italics are mine to emphasize the fact that, for Winter, “old military history” seemed not to be humane, giving support to what we have said about its acceptance among “non-military” historians. We will analyze Keegan’s work later in detail, as while it was at the birth of “new military history”, it has remained an exception. Besides Keegan, Jay Winter also considers Paul Fussell and Eric J. Leed “the founding fathers” of the discipline, the former for his groundbreaking work entitled *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975). Taking its approach from literary criticism, this work heavily influenced subsequent generations with its claim that in order to make sense of the chaotic experience of modern warfare, its participants escaped to a new, modern myth built on an essentially ironic understanding of the modern world that brought a sharp rupture with the old as well as with those who did not see combat first-hand.23 The resulting debate, in which Jay Winter took the opposing stance in his own influential text, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (1995) – seeing much more continuity across narratives of war as well as across wartime society itself – made the study of war memory and remembrance a mainstream theme in military history.24 Similarly, Eric Leed’s psycho-historical study, influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis and cultural anthropology, did the same for the cultural meanings of conflict.25

These works formed a base upon which the “new military history” of the Great War stands today, sprawling to all possible corners of human experience.

of a modern conflict over the past fifty years. Thus, as early as the 1970s, Klaus Theweleit took the tools of Freudian psychoanalysis and gender studies, and put them to work on the perpetrators of “white terror” in the Weimar Republic in the early 1920s. Subsequent works by George Mosse, who saw modern warfare as the cornerstone of modern masculinity as well as a cradle of totalitarian thought, established veteran identity and comradeship, the interpretations and societal consequences of the so-called “war experience”, as one of the most hotly debated issues in the field.

Turning our attention to the war itself, an immensely wide range of topics would fit under the broad wings of “new military history”. While political histories periodically revisit the causal chains of events that led to the war, in which Austria-Hungary is usually seen to have played a key part, pre-war militarism and “military culture” has also been examined by authors such as Laurence Cole, who analyzed the issue of societal militarization in pre-war Austria, and Christa Hämmerle, who contrasted the discourse of male citizenship with the military’s unwillingness to utilize it fully as an ideology behind universal conscription.

29 For the most recent example, see CHRISTOPHER CLARK, *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went To War in 1914*, London 2013.
Wartime communication, particularly letters and the practice of letter-writing, as well as the censorship thereof, came under scrutiny as part of studying both the home-front relationships and the Alltagsgeschichte of the population at war, soldiers and civilians alike. The so-called home front, with the issues such as loyalty, group identity, the economy of everyday life, class and gender politics, has become almost a field by itself, focusing fully on the way wartime pressures changed communities, regions, as well as whole societies. In this area, particular attention is given to women’s experiences of wartime, reflecting on the massive shifts in their social position, changing concepts of femininity, as well as on issues such as wartime prostitution and sexual violence.


34 For a recent summary of these issues in the case of Austria, see CHRISTA HÄMMERLE, Heimat/Front. Geschlechtergeschichte des Ersten Weltkrieges in Österreich-Ungarn, Vienna 2014; on prostitution, see NANCY M. WINGFIELD, The World of Prostitution in Late Imperial Austria, Oxford, 2017; on sexual violence against women and their changing situation in wartime in general, see, Gender and War in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe, (eds.) NANCY M. WING-
general has been a subject of inquiry since the days of Magnus Hirschfeld in 1930s, but found its way into the field of “military history” with the works of authors such as Santanu Das, Jason Crouthamel or, in the case of Austria, of Oswald Überegger, i.e. authors who focused on the way soldiers experienced their sexuality under the constraints of wartime service.\(^{35}\) The soldier’s side of the conflict also came under scrutiny from the point of view of masculinity studies, with several authors – including myself – examining how both societal discourse and individual experience of masculinity were shaped by military service in peace and in war.\(^{36}\) And, taking inspiration from French historiography, children’s wartime experiences also became a focus of study.\(^{37}\)


\(^{37}\) See Kindheit im Ersten Weltkrieg (ed.) CHRISTA HÄMMERLE, Vienna, 1998; Kindheit und Schule im Ersten Weltkrieg, (eds.) HANNES STEKL, CHRISTA HÄMMERLE, ERNST BRUCKMÜLLER, Vienna 2014; STÉPHAN AUDOIN-ROUZEAU, La guerre des enfants,
The research of the past twenty years has managed to close the massive gap found in traditional military histories when it came to state violence, repressions, and atrocities against non-combatants during the war. Wolfgang Dornik and Stefan Karner edited a collection on the wartime occupation of Ukraine, while Jonathan Gumz wrote a revealing study on the Austro-Hungarian campaign and occupation practice in Serbia. Similarly, a group of authors around Hannes Leidinger focused on how the Austro-Hungarian state turned against its subjects with increasing force and violence, both in the occupied territories and in the hinterland, while a number of historians tackled the issue of wartime escalation of violence in numerous European conflicts, including the Great War. As a part of our understanding of non-combatant experience of the war, the issues of forced relocation and war refugees, which had important consequences for the way war was experienced in Bohemia and Moravia as well, have also received substantial attention in the past two decades.

As we have already mentioned, “new military history” began with studies of the so-called war experience, which a number of authors such as George L. Mosse and Paul Fussell see as key to the creation of a modern – for some, in-
herently totalitarian – consciousness. This idea of studying the First World War “from below” was not new, of course, as it reached back to Jean Norton-Cru’s critical analysis of French soldiers’ accounts of their experience. However, shifts in the historical profession during the 1970s and 1980s added a dizzying range of manifold interdisciplinary approaches to the previous limited efforts searching for objective “truth”, focusing instead on the notion of subjectivity. Textual analysis, group psychology, various forms of psychoanalysis, military psychology, gender analysis, and social and cultural anthropology were all methods that came to the foreground in the process. In addition to the works already mentioned, Rachel Duffett applied anthropological and social analysis to the way British soldiers ate – and what it meant for them and their morale; Rok Stergar later applied a similar approach to Slovenian-speaking soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian army. Bernd Ulrich studied the everyday subjective experience, motivations, and disillusionment of German soldiers, while Michael Roper focused on the issue of the emotions and “emotional survival” of their British counterparts. Robert L. Nelson analyzed the content and socio-cultural importance of trench newspapers published in the German army in the West, while Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau used the same primary source to analyze motivation and “national sentiment” in the French army. The Habsburg officer corps’ pre-war sentiments, class identity, and self-perception were recently analyzed by Martin Schmitz. Soldiers recruited from among demographic minorities have increas-

ingly come to the focus of recent research, with the stinging issue of their loyalty always close to the surface.\textsuperscript{48} The very question of what exactly motivated men to fight became a hotly debated issue, with opinion oscillating between coercion – where men were passive victims of the system – and consent – where men more or less acted on their own will to fight, for various reasons.\textsuperscript{49}

In the Austro-Hungarian context, the issue of motivation is inextricably linked to the wider problem of loyalty to the Habsburg state, which became the focus of a number of works dealing both with servicemen and with other specific social groups.\textsuperscript{50} Frontline experience on the Isonzo and in the Alps, both in terms of everyday existence and of its subsequent (re-)interpretation in history and memory, was examined by several authors.\textsuperscript{51} Mark Cornwall has covered the

\textit{ISTVÁN DEÁK, Beyond Nationalism. A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848–1918, Oxford 1990.}

\textsuperscript{48} See \textit{Minderhaiten-Soldaten. Ethnizität und Identität in den Armeen des Ersten Weltkriegs, (ed.) OSWALD ÜBEREGGER, Paderborn 2018.}


effects wartime propaganda had on the Habsburg war effort, while several classic works analyzed the issue of morale in the Austro-Hungarian army through the stinging issue of desertion and various other ways in which soldiers resisted the Imperial and Royal authority during the war. The experiences of Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war were successfully investigated by Alon Rachamimov, Hannes Leidinger and Verena Moritz, while the latter two authors also brought to light the treatment of Russian POWs in Austro-Hungarian prisoner-of-war camps. And although it has been given only passing attention in the context


of Austria-Hungary, it would be inappropriate to summarize the “new military approach” to the study of the First World War without mentioning the seminal works by Joanna Bourke and Sabine Kienitz on the ways in which bodily trauma and disability were understood and interpreted in wartime and post-war Britain and Germany, respectively.\textsuperscript{55} Indeed, the approaches behind those works were a prime mover of historiographic interest in the ways individuals, medical and military institutions and indeed whole societies dealt with the even more pressing and ill-defined issue of psychological trauma, i.e. shell shock.\textsuperscript{56}

If we look at this brief summary of the “new military history” of the First World War with particular attention given to Central European experience, we note that the topic of battle and combat violence is, perhaps conspicuously, almost entirely missing. With the notable exception of John Keegan, whose seminal study \textit{The Face of Battle} has inspired a rather limited following (see below for an overview),\textsuperscript{57} it seems as if today’s historians of warfare have fallen into the trap Carl von Clausewitz described in his criticism of his predecessors: “Kind-hearted people might of course think there was some ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed.”\textsuperscript{58} In fact, if we attempt to outline the picture of war painted by the research above, we see a pattern – we see societies succumbing to militarism, study men spending long days longing for their loved ones at home, as well as those loved ones falling victim to worsening economic conditions or, worse, state repression. We see armies committing atrocities and generally operating in enforcing their often harsh idea of internal security. We analyze the way society has changed under external pressure, the shifting roles expected of men and women, and we see men having a hard time


\textsuperscript{57} JOHN KEEGAN, \textit{The Face of Battle}, London 1976.

\textsuperscript{58} C. VON CLAUSEWITZ, \textit{On War}, pp. 75–76.
accommodating the process. There is a focus on women being economically and sexually exploited, as well as an interest in the emotional, mental, and physical consequences of modern warfare. Soldiers’ loyalty to the cause and their experience of captivity are given extensive treatment, as is their resistance to the war. Yet the closest we get to combat is in the analysis of motivational structures that served to get the men fighting in the first place or to keep them at it for long periods of time – which, as we all know, was happening a lot. Only the gruesome reality of what that fighting entailed was apparently not noticed by “new military history”.

“Non-Combat” Military History?

In fact, a quick look into various collections of scholarly essays focusing on military history in the Central European context only further confirms this conclusion. A collection entitled *What is Military History*, edited by Thomas Kühne and Benjamin Ziemann in 2000, includes essays on culture, gender, economy, politics, and even operations (which is as close as it gets to combat), but lacks any specific analysis of *how* the war was actually fought. Similarly, a more recent collection putting together contemporary research on *Pomp – Violence – Obedience* as primary concepts reflected in the history of the Habsburg military and society between 1800 till 1918, while openly claiming to represent all the possible approaches in “new military history”, does not include any essay on combat or the violence involved in it. Instead, the major focus is on the way societies as well as individuals prepare (or are prepared) for war, how they experience military service in peacetime as well as in war, their resistance, cultural representations, and accommodation of war’s consequences. Also, while some essays in the inspired, thoroughly comparative collection on the perception of war experience (mostly) on the Eastern Front edited by Bernhard Bachinger and Wolfram Dornik in 2014, came close to analyzing the immediate socio-cultural context and direct emotional consequences of combat, they still did not tackle the very issue of men in the process of combat.

61 *Jenseits des Schützengrabens. Der Erste Weltkrieg im Osten. Erfahrung – Wahrnehmung – Kontext*, (eds.) BERNARD BACHINGER, WOLFRAM DORNIK, Innsbruck 2013. While most essays in the collection do, often in enlightening ways, deal with a multitude of the “classic” themes
While works that analyze World War I combat are scarce, they are not entirely non-existent. As we have mentioned, some of the studies listed above do come close to doing so, from their specific points of view. In my own study of wartime soldiers’ masculinity, the reality of combat is analyzed as a means of understanding its possible influences on the ways soldiers experienced their own sense of being men, which in turn influenced their willingness to participate in the fighting.\(^{62}\) Richard Lein used a rather traditional tactical analysis of a specific combat situation to help us understand the background of the myth of the k.u.k. Infantry Regiment 28 deserting en masse to the Russians in April 1915.\(^{63}\) Even more importantly, Marian Füssel and Michael Sikora recently edited an inspiring collection of essays linking battlefield violence with broader cultural analysis and covering numerous combat engagements throughout European history.\(^{64}\) While Lutz Musner analyses the combat reality of the Isonzo battles as a source of a specific culture of war and its memory, Christoph Nübel makes violence an integral part of his case study of the German Spring Offensive in 1918.\(^{65}\) As for the Western Front, we have an inspiring study of combatants on both sides and how they coped with their everyday experience of the frontline, written by Frederic Rousseau, albeit with only casual reference to the realities and practices of “new military history” (such as memory, trauma, POW experience, cultural perception, or various forms of identity under stress), the essays by Lutz Musner on the experience of the Isonzo front and by Sabine Haring on the German army in the first few months of war in the East are of particular interest here. See LUTZ MUSNER, *Carso Maledetto. Der Isonzo-Krieg 1915–1917*, in: Jenseits des Schützengrabens, pp. 267–284; SABINE A. HARING, *K.u.k. Soldaten an der Ostfront im Sommer und Herbst 1914. Eine emotionssoziologische Analyse*, in: Jenseits des Schützengrabens, pp. 65–86.\(^{62}\) J. HUTEČKA, *Muži proti ohni*, pp. 166–189.\(^{63}\) R. LEIN, *Pflichterfüllung oder Hochverrat*, pp. 39–348. Regarding tactical developments, there exist numerous studies dealing with the Western Front in particular, most of which see tactics in technical terms and soldiers as mere (albeit unreliable) executive tools. See for example PADDY GRIFFITH, *Battle Tactics on the Western Front. The British Army’s Art of Attack, 1916–1918*, New Haven 1994; BRUCE I. GUDMUNDSSON, *Stormtroop Tactics. Innovation in the German Army, 1914–1918*, London 1989.\(^{64}\) Kulturgeschichte der Schlacht, (eds.) MARIAN FÜSSEL, MICHAEL SIKORA, Paderborn 2014.\(^{65}\) LUTZ MUSNER, *Der Isonzo-Krieg 1915–1917. Kriegslandschaft, Gewalterfahrung und Erinnerungspolitik*, in: Kulturgeschichte der Schlacht, pp. 205–230; CHRISTOPH NÜBEL, *Die Geschichte der Schlacht. Methodische Überlegungen am Beispiel der Michael-Offensive 1918*, in: Kulturgeschichte der Schlacht, pp. 231–258.
of combat itself. There are also interesting approaches to combat motivation and morale, the key precursors to the successful combat performance of any military unit, such as Alexander Watson’s comparative study of psychological endurance in the British and German armies, or Tony Ashworth’s semi-sociological analysis of the “live and let live system”. However, in Ashworth’s case, the main focus in actually on men finding ways to avoid combat and on the military machine pushing them into it. In Watson’s case, at least, we get a close look at the agency of men, as he rightly sees them as willing, active participants in organized violence.

The issue of agency is not only crucial to the debate over consent versus coercion; it is symptomatic of the whole discourse of “new military history”. As it turns out, and a quick glance over the aforementioned literature only confirms this, recent research has tended overwhelmingly to study “the devastation and casualties of war, both military and civilian”. While a legitimate approach, particularly in the light of the fact that these themes were all but omitted – or perhaps nonchalantly taken for granted – by “old” military history, it is particularly striking when we consider soldiers. In the case of the First World War, we know for certain that millions were killed in the line of battle – but in the eyes of much of the recent research, there seem to have been essentially no agents of war causing this damage. Instead, most recent research has studied military subjects as hardly consenting, mostly dissenting, victims of war, overlooking the enormous complexity of their position. Many fully legitimate aspects of soldiers’ experience – their everyday life, desertion, captivity, resistance, suicide, shell shock, disability, memory and remembrance – dominate the field of research, reinforcing this tendency towards victimization in a sort of infinite loop, where agency only appears in connection with efforts to escape warfare rather than to participate in it. Here, we must agree with Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Anette Becker, who wrote eighteen years ago that “a peaceloving, indeed pacifist, ideology about the war to end all wars had prevailed for a long time. (...) In the context of personal or family memory, it is better to be a victim than an agent of suffering and death. Death is always inflicted, always anonymous, never dispensed; one is al-

ways a victim of it. Or a victim of one’s leaders. By transforming combatants into sacrificial lambs offered to the military butchers, the process of victimization has long impeded thought.”

As urged by Leonard Smith in his study of French soldiers’ agency, we must ask: “What is excluded if we consider the Great War as a tragedy and the soldier as a victim? What do the war, and the soldier, look like if we put whatever is excluded back in?” While he means re-introducing agency in analyzing soldiers’ motivation to fight, we may as well broaden his appeal to the whole issue of combat – what would the war look like if we put killing, dying, and fighting back in? How would it change our understanding of the past?

The process of excluding the violent essence of war – combat itself – from most scholarly accounts and analyses even of the combatants themselves may well be traced to the sources themselves. In general, analysis of combat experience primarily relies on more or less personal accounts of participants from various levels of military hierarchy, and as is clear to anyone who has ever worked with these sources in bulk, the theme of combat receives conspicuously similar treatment in those first-hand accounts as it does decades later by those who analyze them. Whether out of guilt, sensitivity or the sheer inability of communicating the details of what they have gone through, combat soldiers do not voluntarily recount their direct encounters with warfare. Of course, there are exceptions, as Joanna Bourke has shown (see below), but overall this may be a reason why historians are not able to study combat violence – the soldiers themselves often prefer to see themselves as victims of war rather than agents of destruction, and “new military history” mirrors the nature of the available sources.

On the other hand, it seems that in many a historical account of war, there is also an invisible wall, a line that most historians would not cross, and it is connected to its very physical nature: “The violence of war inevitably takes us back to a history of the body. In war, bodies strike each other, suffer and inflict suffering,” wrote Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, adding: “The history of warfare – particularly academic and scholarly history, but also traditional military history – is all too often disembodied (...) [which leads to] unacceptable way of sanitizing war”. Fittingly, they equal this discursive treatment to a similar cultural “Puritanism” in academic histories of sexuality, claiming that while most historians would agree that there are plenty of positives to be taken from a thorough analysis of combat

violence, “one must be willing to look closely”.\textsuperscript{72} It seems that most historians, in the end, simply do not look, mirroring their sources the soldiers, perhaps out of the same combination of guilt, sensitivity, and inability to properly communicate what seems incommunicable. The problem is that this approach may end up distorting the images of history they create. As Clausewitz said – although he was not talking about historians, but rather contemporary military thinkers – “it would be futile – even wrong – to try and shut one’s eyes to what war really is from sheer distress at its brutality”.\textsuperscript{73}

There are in fact several exceptional works that, while not particularly interested in the First World War \textit{per se}, do cover it out of necessity as it presents them with suitable primary sources – using these sources to analyze, fully or at least in part, the very essence of war: killing. Richard Holmes devotes a chapter of his seminal study of men in war to what he calls “the epitome of war”, i.e. combat. While the results are mixed because of an apparent lack of methodology, he still brings us tantalizingly close to what soldiers generally experience and feel during combat, i.e. while killing and being killed.\textsuperscript{74} More than a decade later, Joanna Bourke finally devoted a full book to the “intimate history of killing” in 20\textsuperscript{th} century warfare. While arguably selective in her approach, both in picking off non-typical behavioural patterns as well as in relying on the accounts of those who willingly remembered and perhaps even enjoyed close combat, she is right in insisting that contrary to what both old and new military histories tend to tell us (each in a different way), “the characteristic act distinctive of men at war is not dying, it is killing.”\textsuperscript{75} Only, we may add, in modern warfare, this usually no longer involves close personal contact.

We may well now ask whether there is, after all, any grain of truth in the criticism wielded against the concept of “new military history” by the more traditionally oriented military historians, who have always suspected it, in the words of Jeremy Black, of a “tendency to de-militarize military history”, “forgetting too easily that fighting was a prime concern of the military, its special function, and should therefore play a central role in military history”.\textsuperscript{76} “Escaping from war” and “ignoring combat itself and performance in war” are common criticisms from those who pit themselves against “new military history”, which, at

\textsuperscript{73} C. VON CLAUSEWITZ, \textit{On War}, p. 76.
\textsuperscript{76} J. BLACK, \textit{Rethinking Military History}, pp. 6 and 79.
times, is “accused of being interested in everything about armies except the way they fought, interested in everything about war except campaigns and battles.”

To summarize this criticism in the words of John Lynn, “these approaches had a tendency to divert us from an essential nature of military history at the same time that they promised to enlighten us. To me, the essence of military history is combat.”

As it happens, Lynn was also one of the few exceptions among the self-defined “traditionalists” who actually focused on combat in his inspiring study of the way organized violence has been culturally conditioned throughout various stages of history and different human cultures, and managed to connect his cultural analysis with the traditional (and, in the end, historically important) issue of combat performance, i.e. “winning” and “losing”. Otherwise, “old military history” remained mostly where it was, ignoring the complexities of war such as combat and its violence: “All too often military historians consider it indecent to deal with the problem of violence in combat or to study violence as such. Battles and warfare are discussed only from the tactical or strategic angle; military events are viewed only from a social or political standpoint. On the whole, the reality of war is kept at bay” even by those who take particular pride in giving it all their attention.

As a result of these scholarly developments, the history of combat remains, rather ironically, stuck in a methodological no man’s land of current trends in the historical study of warfare.

Which brings us back to the roots of “new military history” and John Keegan’s *The Face of Battle* which, and I do not want to sound defeatist, while a bit dated, I still consider the best and most inspiring historiographic treatment of combat, violence, and warfare ever written. Keegan, a British military historian, used a comparative approach to analyze three “battle pieces”: Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Battle of the Somme, to see “what actually happened in battle”. He combined psychology (both individual and that of crowds), class analysis, medical analysis, and technical analysis with more traditional insight into the mechanics of military tactics. His conclusion, as groundbreaking today as it was in 1976, was that battle is and always has been a story of fear and instinct, confusion and chaos; of stress and emotions; of human bodies pushed to the limit of their ability, integrity, and beyond; of blood, pain, and suffering; of sensory overload and

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crowd behaviour; and of the limited ability of all involved to control the intractable chain of events. Even more importantly, he concluded that these factors, dependent on cultural, social, and psychological structures as much as on tactical manuals, commanders’ decisions, or available technology, shaped history at least as much as the “grand themes” such as strategy or policies did.\(^{81}\)

Various historians over the past four decades have praised Keegan’s work for the way it uncovered these truths “with power, subtlety, and technical authority”,\(^{82}\) bringing “breathtaking results” where “readers can almost hear the screams of men and horses”, the “fog of battle’ was transformed into a storm of emotion”, and “the humanity of the individual soldier was laid bare.”\(^{83}\) For others, the author defied “the discipline’s most established rules of caution (…) focusing exclusively on violence,” and authors such as Tony Ashworth or Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau took direct inspiration from his effort.\(^{84}\) Of course, the same four decades saw substantial criticism and revision of Keegan’s work, much of it deserved, as while thoroughly inspiring in its original idea, the work suffers from sloppy sourcing and many imperfections in detail. On the other hand, its success in picking apart the historical experience of combat in war has hardly ever been emulated both in military history in general and in the study of World War I in particular.

**Conclusion**

The basic question that remains to be answered, of course, is what can be done to alleviate this situation? I will now try to offer some ideas, and following John Keegan’s steps may well be a good start. We should try and look at what is behind the words we, as historians, conventionally use to describe military events, and ask what actually happens on the battlefield, how violence is wielded in battle, and why combat happens in this way and not another. In short, a sort of an anthropology of combat is welcome, as it is necessary to fill the gap left between the positions of traditional and “new” military histories.

81 J. KEEGAN, *The Face of Battle*. For a more psychologically oriented study, see the following work by an American World War II veteran on 20th century warfare, which can be seen as a precursor of both Keegan’s and Richard Holmes’ texts: J. GLENN GRAY, *The Warriors. Reflections on Men in Battle*, Lincoln, NE, 1958.


83 J. BOURKE, *New Military History*, p. 266.

By anthropology, I do not mean only a limited import of anthropological approaches. While the performative, ritualistic quality of battlefield violence, representing a very specific form of inter-personal and inter-group communication, is readily apparent in many anthropological studies of warfare and in works by Joanna Bourke, Tony Ashworth or Petr Wohlmuth (to go back to Czech historical writing on war), we need to look beyond just one theorem.\(^6\) Mobilizing the interpretative powers of many of the “new military history” approaches and applying these to the issue of combat is obviously the way to a fuller understanding of the First World War as a historical experience. Disentangling the web of individual motivations, psychology, gender and class identity, ideology, societal values and expectations, group dynamics, institutional practices, technological limitations, and geographical and environmental context – to name just the most important issues influencing battlefield performance – may seem almost impossible, but it is necessary to further our understanding of various experiences, attitudes, motivations and practices when it comes to exerting violence in war.\(^6\)

Of course, the massive obstacle of biased, fragmented, insufficient, or outright silent primary sources will have to be overcome in some way, either by enlarging our samples, through rigorous textual analysis, or by employing other sources of information, be that official, medical or iconographic. We may also need to take archaeology into account, with its ability to enlighten us about the very physical dimension of our subject matter and judge our written sources, such as personal or medical accounts, against the physical remains of past reality. In the same way, serious considerations of geography are necessary to understand the physical and spatial context of the battle scene properly. Even so, personal accounts and


86 As inspiration for this somewhat holistic approach, we may look at John Lynn’s seminal study of the French army in the Revolutionary Wars, in which he creates a complex, systematic model of combat effectiveness in an attempt to cover some of these themes, offering us an interesting framework open to further tweaking. See JOHN A. LYNN, *The Bayonets of the Republic. Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France*, 1791–94, Urbana 1984.
their textual analysis will probably always remain the main source in any effort to understand what human beings feel (or think they feel) in the maelstrom of war.87

Last but not least, broader cultural analysis, similar to that conducted by John Lynn in his study of combat during the past two thousand years, may be applicable to the First World War as well, both in a specific variation on Alan Kramer’s call for transnational research of the conflict,88 and as an interpretative framework that sees combat violence as both forming and reflecting cultural practices, bringing victory or defeat in the process.89 This “cultural approach to the history of war”, as defined by John Shy as early as 1993, which is not dissimilar to what John Keegan did in The Face of Battle, may be particularly useful in the study of combat in the Austro-Hungarian context.90 During their last war, the armies of the Habsburg Empire fought in many different geographical areas against radically different enemies. Also, although they supposedly constituted one military institution, their heterogeneous nature and the even more heterogeneous nature of the society they represented meant that multiple military cultures co-existed on the battlefield. And, in the meantime, technological and tactical developments constantly changed the patterns of violence that emerged out of these various, dynamically interacting cultural frameworks. Consequently, such an approach may help us to better understand the dynamics and practice of combat violence as experienced by the monarchy’s soldiers throughout the conflict. The nature of battlefield violence, still mostly shrouded in the “fog of war”, will then hopefully cease to be the great unknown in the military history of that conflict, and the metaphorical no man’s land where it lingers would be at least partially conquered.

87 For similar conclusions regarding the importance of archaeology and battlefield geography, see Kulturgeschichte der Schlacht, (eds.) M. FÜSSEL, M. SIKORA, p. 22.
88 A. KRAMER, Recent Historiography of the First World War (Part I), pp. 7–9.