

H-Net Reviews

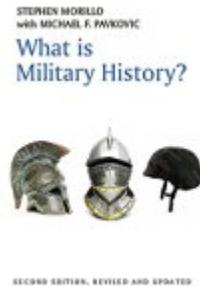
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stephen Morillo, Michael F. Pavkovic. *What is Military History?* Cambridge: Polity, 2013. vi + 165 pp. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7456-5979-4; \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7456-5978-7.

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Published on H-War (October, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



Roadmap: Leading a Student Down the Path of Military History

In *What is Military History?*, Stephen Morillo and Michael F. Pavkovic set out to provide what they refer to as a “roadmap” for students new to the subject and the study of military history. With their map in hand, Morillo and Pavkovic trust that the students reading their book will come away with an understanding of what military history means, how it was studied in the past, and how the study of military history has changed. While the pair admits their short survey could not possibly instruct the student on every aspect of military history, *What is Military History?* nevertheless provides a sturdy base for the study of the subject.

Morillo and Pavkovic begin with the history of military history and historiography. In this chapter, the pair gives the student the background of military reporting, beginning with the historic tales of Greece and Rome and marching up through history to the mid-1970s, when John Keegan appears on the scene. Throughout that time military history transitioned from a few scattered battle tales into a highly specialized profession that not only sought to tell the stories of men and warfare, but also to tell them from different perspectives. The nationalist, racist, Eurocentric studies of military history have receded in favor of cross-pollination with different disciplines. Beyond the expansion of military history to include other disciplines, Morillo and Pavkovic note the work of Keegan, who introduced *The Face of Battle* in 1976. That monograph changed the study of military history itself, with an entire subsection of studies now called “Face of Battle” studies. Keegan took a microscope to

military history by focusing on the people who fought: why they fought, how they fought, and what happened to them. It was one of the first times a historian looked beyond the leaders and battles to see the people on those battlefields, and Morillo and Pavkovic rightly introduce Keegan’s work as a milestone in the study of military history.

Keegan’s work serves as a bridge to Morillo and Pavkovic’s discussion of the conceptual frameworks that military historians work in. While full of terms and jargon related to the study of military history, the discussion is nevertheless extremely important to anyone interested in studying the subject. Morillo and Pavkovic introduce the concepts of strategy and tactics, causation and rationality, among other concepts important to the study of military history. They also introduce the concept of “flesh witnessing,” an especially important phrase for those students who do not have prior experience in the military. The phrase essentially means, “you had to be there”; in other words, if you have no military or combat experience, how can you write about military history? Morillo and Pavkovic explain their thoughts and set the minds of future historians at ease with their explanation. The pair reinforces the misconception of “flesh witnessing” by pointing again to John Keegan, who noted in the introduction to *The Face of Battle* that he himself had no prior military experience.

In the chapter following, Morillo and Pavkovic explain to the student a number of controversies swirling

around the military history profession. Amongst those controversies is the idea put forward by Victor Davis Hanson of the “Western way of war,” which posits that a singular type of warfare has existed continuously all the way from the city-states of Greece to the militaries of today. Morillo and Pavkovic sketch both sides of that issue, as well as the controversies surrounding the “military revolution debate” and the study of insurgencies, counterinsurgencies, and terrorism. The pair ultimately concludes, “constant reinterpretation is central to history and is the responsibility of every student of history” (p. 76). Every debate sparked within the field of military history serves the ultimate purpose of strengthening both the historians and the profession as a whole.

Morillo and Pavkovic conclude with chapters on “doing” military history and the future of the profession. After describing the importance and distinctions between primary and secondary sources, the pair gives their readers a brief description of some programs open to both military personnel and the public who want to pursue degrees in military history. They also describe some of

the major societies and publishers that serve as outlets for military historians, including the Society for Military History and its publication, the *Journal of Military History*. Morillo and Pavkovic finish with their predictions about the future of the profession, noting that predicting history is like predicting the weather—the further out you look, the less likely you are to be right. Nevertheless, Morillo and Pavkovic imagine the expansion of war and gender studies and the further globalization of military history, as well as the impact of television, movies, and video games on students and historians alike.

Though not a comprehensive look at every single aspect of military history—an achievement Morillo and Pavkovic admittedly do not attempt—*What is Military History?* serves as the supportive roadmap Morillo and Pavkovic meant it to be. Any student of military history needs this book on their bookshelf, and every military history program needs to include this book on their reading list for aspiring military historians.

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Citation: Adam Koeth. Review of Morillo, Stephen; Pavkovic, Michael F., *What is Military History?*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 2013.

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