Visions of War: Experience, Imagination and Predictions of War in the Past and Present

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From April 19 to April 20, 2016, the Estonian War Museum – General Laidoner Museum convened scholars from Sweden to South Africa and from Spain to Japan to talk about, and discuss, visions of war. The time period covered by the presenters ranged from Medieval Scotland to predictions about the globalized future of war.

MARTIN VAN CREVELD (Jerusalem) gave the keynote lecture on „Studying War". The best teacher of war, whose goal is to kill and to gain victory, is war itself. Military officers need to obtain experience starting from the lowest echelons before they can eventually graduate to staff work; the higher up in the hierarchy, the more diversified the (non-military) factors are that influence decision-making. And although „war is not a university class"—after all, some of the most able commanders had little education at all—it is vital to study the experience of past warfare. Still, there cannot be a handbook to foresee every eventuality, and the study of war does not prevent later generations from committing the same mistakes as their forebears.

Starting off the presentation of papers, IAIN MACINNES (Inverness) shed light on the military testament of Scottish King Robert I (1274–1329). Unlike previous historians who have claimed that Robert's successors failed to adhere to his suggestions—fighting on foot, using Scotland's topography, employing slash and burn tactics, and trying to not fight the English in open battle—MacInnes holds that they actually did, for the most part, take to heart their victorious king's advice; their failure on the battlefield should not obscure this.

Jumping to the 19th century, OLIVER HEMMERLE (Grenoble) discussed the impact of Sir Edward S. Creasy's 1851 „The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World" on British and German military history writing. Hemmerle showed that the concept of „decisive battles" reflects upon the social and political context of history writing; the selection of encounters was usually nationally centered and bears witness to a certain canon of battles and a national narrative. Moreover, he raised the question what actually makes a battle „decisive" since some empires tumbled after winning a „decisive battle."

Over- and underestimations in the prediction of future warfare were the topic of MICHAEL H. CLEMESSEN (Copenhagen). The British Royal Navy's plans for war with Imperial Germany wrongly envisioned one decisive battle and underestimated the submarine and the possibility of a protracted trade war. It also overestimated the role of some latest generation arms such as torpedo boats. On the other hand, some vessels were outdated tactic-wise the moment they hit the water. Clemessen made the case that militaries should actually train the way they want to fight—financial and other constraints would most likely lead to misreadings of and mispreparations for future war.

The role and plans of a neutral in war were at the heart of MART KULDKEPP's (London) talk about Sweden before and during World War I. While the Scandinavian nation stayed out of alliances, preparations for war were a hotly debated issue before 1914. The majorly pro-German officer corps' anti-Russian sentiments resulted in several possible war scenarios, with the most likely one an eventual invasion by Russia. „Activist," i.e. pro-interventionist, circles harbored ideas for a more active Swedish role up to engaging in the war on Germany's side.

CARLO CIPRIANI (Rome) elaborated on strategic air war visionary Giulio Douhet. In order to prevent the long and bloody battles of World War I, Douhet championed the air force as the only decisive arm in future conflicts. After obtaining air superiority, bombers were to attack important strategic targets at the enemy's vital center—industry, seats of power, and civilian population—and thereby achieve victory in a total war. This vision had international repercussions (cf. the Allied air campaign against Nazi Germany) and continues to be up-to-date in the age of the nuclear bomb.

KAAREL PIIRIMÄE (Tallinn) asked why

Estonia, unlike France or Finland, did not fight back in 1939-1940. Estonia's success in its war of independence (1918-1920) against the Red Army served as a basis for national identity and thinking on military affairs. While Estonian officers were well aware of international military thought, the equipment and training of the forces at their disposal was sorely lacking. Also, the Soviet Army of 1940 was not the same as in 1920. Therefore, good morale, based on the experience of the Independence War, could not make up for unrealistic plans as well as outdated weapons and equipment, forcing the Estonian leadership to give up to the Soviet Union without a fight.

How modern war relies on intelligence was explored by JUHO KOTAKALLIO (Helsinki) in the development of the Finnish signal intelligence service (SIGINT) until 1945. Facing the numerically superior Soviet Union, information gathering was a must for Finland's defense. Built up during the 1920s and 1930s, the Finnish SIGINT decrypted Soviet codes, intercepted messages, and used the information gained, often to good military effect, in the 1939-40 Winter War and the 1941-1944 Continuation War, thereby proving its effectiveness to Finnish military planners and growing from a small but elite branch of the military to a vital asset with numerous listening posts and international connections.

Continuing with the Second World War, MICHAEL JUNG (Hannover) talked about Nazi German scientist Werner Osenberg. In 1943-44, Osenberg wrote several memoranda for high-level National Socialists, complaining that German research and industry were not yet completely adjusted to the war. He championed a „Totaleinsatz", the total mobilization of all technicians, to gain the „Endsieg." His ideas, though, came too late. After the war, the „Osenberg action" was seen as non-political, and Osenberg himself kept his professorship, reflecting the continuities often found in post-war West Germany from the time of the „Third Reich."

ALON POSNER (Jerusalem) presented Israeli and South African perspectives on future conflicts. In the 1950s, Israel prepared for a „second round" of Arab aggression. It was also afraid of becoming a theater of war in a potential Third World War between the U.S. and Soviet blocs. 1970s South Africa geared itself toward various types of confrontation: terrorism on its borders, a communist (black) internal threat, an Afro-communist conventional threat, and a UN-led invasion. Posner showed how threat scenarios can keep influencing doctrines, war materiel, planning, politicians, and the view a country has of itself over a long time.

GARY BAINES (Grahamstown) analyzed the Vietnam War's influence on the perception of armed conflicts in southern Africa. In the Apartheid Wars, the anti-colonial struggle in Vietnam was seen by the African National Congress as a role model for its fight. For the South African Defense Forces (SADF), it was a constant reminder for possible failure; hence, the SADF tried to learn its counter-insurgency lessons as well as that of other conflicts such as Algeria and Malaysia. (Viet)NAM(ibia) became a reference point for analogies and metaphors also among the rank and file. South Africa's „border war" in Namibia and Angola was thus reimagined and culturally codified using examples drawn from other conflicts.

ROBERT JACOBS (Hiroshima) delineated how U.S. troops were prepared for World War III's nuclear battlefield. In the 1950s, tactical nuclear weapons such as atomic artillery mirrored the continuity of World War II tactics and the implementation of nukes as viable weapons on the modern battlefield. American troops were exposed to nuclear blasts in exercises to encounter radiation and psychologically condition them; their reactions were evaluated and integrated into military training. G.I.'s were to become „atomic soldiers."

Imagining a Third World War (almost) without nuclear weapons was at the center of BENEDICT VON BREMEN's (Tübingen) presentation. In the 1970s, with nuclear parity between the USA and the USSR as well as NATO's new strategy of „flexible response," conventional warfare seemed to become more feasible again. Western military experts envisioned how modern weapons and tactics would be used in the Central European theater of World War III, thereby reflecting upon the improvements needed by NATO to credibly deter or, if need be, successfully defend

against a Warsaw Pact attack, all for a war which never happened.

BLAŽ TORKAR (Maribor) unrolled the development of Yugoslavia's Territorial Defense forces. While Yugoslavia's experience of partisan warfare was substituted with Soviet-style frontal assault doctrine after 1945, the 1950s saw the reemergence of a „Total People's War" concept that received more emphasis in the light of the USSR's quelling of the 1968 Prague Spring. Defense became the right and duty of every Yugoslav citizen; scenarios of attacks both from the Warsaw Pact and NATO were prepared. But Yugoslavia changed politically, nationally and economically.

DIMITAR TASIC (Dublin) followed up on this topic. In the 1960s, Yugoslav military planners expected the next war to be global and total, and the Territorial Defense was sometimes in competition with the Yugoslav People's Army. The latter's officers' virtues—brotherhood, defense of Yugoslavia, and cult of Tito—became useless in the 1990s with its national movements and civil warfare. Still, these „orphaned" officers, as well as the Territorial Defense units (organized along the lines of the various Yugoslav republics), eventually became the core of the new national militaries in the 1990s Wars for Succession.

HELLAR LILL (Tallinn) also shed light upon the transitionary 1990s with respect to Estonian defense. After independence in 1991, Estonia had to basically (re)invent national defense; there were no resources, no infrastructure, no legal framework, no conceptual basis, and no tradition (except pre-WWII). Former exiles and a few Soviet-trained Estonians had to create an Estonian military. Various Ministers of Defense set down Estonia's goals: integration into Europe and NATO, obtained in 2004 and 1999, respectively. This formed the basis for Estonian strategic thinking.

JAMES S. CORUM (Salford) described the lack of a realistic U.S. concept for war since 1990. The 1991 Gulf War created the wrong impression that advanced technology, especially air power, would be the way to military success. Experiences before 1991 were seen as outdated. Counter-insurgency had to be painfully re-learned in Afghanistan and Iraq. Despite this experience, U.S. military planners still want to fight wars at low cost with almost no own casualties by relying on technology and local allies, as the conflicts in Libya, Syria, and drone warfare have shown.

By comparing various NATO military academies, TAMIR LIBEL (Barcelona) interpreted the relationship of military education and military culture. While some academies remain rooted in a system of military instructors preparing their students for daily military life, others have evolved into civilian-academic institutions—a transition from military professionalism to defense professionals. This is good for preparing for low-intensity conflict but detrimental to preparing for high-intensity conflicts.

DANIEL RODRIGUES (Madrid) provided examples of several contemporary TV series and movies to show how popular culture envisions future war. In these representations, new technology and cyber-warfare play a crucial role. Moreover, productions like „Okkupert" (Norway, 2015) reflect upon current political relations, especially security interests and possible threats. Popular culture can therefore serve as a venue for raising public debates about the possibility of such scenarios.

The future is now, as ŁUKASZ KAMIEŃSKI (Krakow) showed in his contribution. Pharmacology and cybergenetics already play an important role in preparing for future conflicts. The U.S. Department of Defense collects soldiers' DNA in order to analyze human genome sequences and phenotypes with significance for military capabilities. Genetic conditioning, screening, licensing, and reprogramming are already the order of the day and genetically modified elite soldiers on the horizon.

TOBIAS BURGERS (Berlin) provided insights on digital and robotic warfare. Reconnaissance and combat drones as well as fully-automated defense systems are with us today. New generations with increased survivability and identification friend or foe systems are being developed and fielded. Conflict used to be human; now, robotic conflict seems to be a feasibility. What will the nature and cost of such future conflicts be? When they will start

and end? The U.S. drone campaign is an example for this: diplomacy loses importance; wars become more easy to start and are primarily economic conflicts.

In his concluding remarks, KAAREL PIIRIMÄE (Estonian War Museum) made the point that it is always easy to criticize from hindsight but hard to make correct predictions of the future. Still, envisioning possible future wars remains important for defense planning and the study of war.

Conference Overview:

Hannes Hanso (Estonian Minister of Defence), Welcome Remarks

Keynote Panel
Martin van Creveld (Hebrew University Jerusalem), Studying War

Iain MacInnes (University of the Highlands and Islands), (Not) Learning the Lessons of War: Scottish and English Experience of Conflict in the Second War of Independence, 1332-1357

Panel „From the 19th Century to the First World War"

Oliver Hemmerle (Grenoble Alpes University), Learning from Decisive Battles Prerequisites to Define and Identify Them: The Legacy of Sir Edward S. Creasy for the Imagination and Predictions of War

Michael H. Clemmesen (Royal Danish Defence College), The Unavoidable Vision Failure - The First World War Naval Case

Mart Kuldkepp (University College London), Sweden Plans for War: Official and Unofficial Military Planning during World War One

Panel „From the Inter-War to the Second World War"

Carlo Cipriani (Italian Air Force), Giulio Douhet, the War of the Future: From the Sky

Kaarel Piirimäe (Estonian War Museum), Imagined War and Operational Concepts in the Estonian Military in the 1930s

Juho Kotakallio (University of Helsinki), The Development of the Finnish SIGINT to the End of the Second World War

Panel „From Total War to the Cold War"

Michael Jung (Leibniz Universität Hannover), Werner Osenberg's Visions of the „Totaleinsatz" of the Entire German Research Potential in Total War

Alon Posner (Hebrew University Jerusalem), Imagining Future Wars: Israeli and South African Perspectives

Gary Baines (Rhodes University), Waging War by Analogy: The Lessons of Vietnam Appropriated by the Protagonists in Southern Africa's Armed Conflicts (1970s-80s)

Panel „Imagining Hot War during the Cold War"

Robert Jacobs (Hiroshima City University), Imaging a Nuclear World War Two in Europe: Preparing US Troops for the Battlefield Use of Nuclear Weapons

Benedict von Bremen (Eberhard Karl Universität Tübingen), Imagining the Third World War: Discussions about NATO's Conventional Defense in the 1970s

Panel „Models of the Past and Transition to the Post-Cold War Era"

Blaž Torkar (Military Schools Centre of the Slovenian Armed Forces/Military Museum), The Doctrine of Total People's Defence – What Yugoslav Armed Forces Learned from its Past

Dmitar Tasic (University College Dublin), „We weren't preparing for this kind of war…" Yugoslav Peoples Army Doctrine and Wars for Yugoslav Succession, 1991–1999

Hellar Lill (Estonian War Museum), Models from the Past and Visions of the Future in the Development of the Estonian Defence Policy, 1991–1999

Panel „Past Futures and Present Trends"

James S. Corum (Salford University), The US Model of War 1990s to the Present – Wrong Assumptions Leading to Strategic Failure

Tamir Libel (Barcelona Institute of International Studies), Comparing Contemporary European Professional Military Education: Drivers and Agents of Change

Roundtable. How to Envision the Future?

Discussant: Margus Kolga

Daniel M. Rodrigues (IE University), Conflict Prospects in Popular Culture: TV Series, Movies and Future Visions of War

Łukasz Kamieński (Jagiellonian University Kraków), Will G.I. Stand for Genetic Infantryman? Genetics, Genomics, and the Prospects of Human Enhancement in the U.S. Military

Tobias J. Burgers (Free University Berlin), Human Visions of Non-human Future War? How Advances in Digital and Robotic Technology Are Creating a New Non-human Notion of Conflict and How Such Conflict Could Be Perpetual

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