

Nov. 12 **New Military History, in Print and on Film**

### **Military History from Below**

21H991

Military history is the oldest form of history. Thucydides and Herodotus focused their accounts around great wars, as did the Chinese writers of the Warring States Period at the same time [ca 500-300 BCE]. And the best historians have always recognized that wars involve much more than heroic generals and dramatic battles: wars mobilize entire societies, drawing on all their cultural and material resources. And military history draws readers: there are probably more books on the Civil War published each year than on whole centuries elsewhere.

Yet professional historians have looked down on military history for quite some time. Ever since the social history move began in the twentieth century, the simple stories of generals and battles have looked elitist and inadequate. Furthermore, since military histories generally exalt the patriotism of one side, and demonize the other, they tend to serve nationalist propaganda more than detached analysis. Recently, new forms of military history have incorporated much wider social perspectives, bringing the subject closer to the main concerns of other historians. John Keegan has been the pre-eminent figure in this movement. Even though, ironically, he, like most Europeans of his generation, has never fought a battle, he has discovered how to bring the experience of ordinary soldiers alive.

How does he do it? Like other social historians, he has only scattered sources at hand: most ordinary soldiers did not leave many documents. For the older battles, in particular, he relies on close examination of terrain, to infer how the conflict must have gone. Environmental and technological constraints always shape the form of battle. And above all, he has great literary skill, evoking the smells, the pain, and the bloodshed by drawing out the meaning of sparse phrases in documents. In one way, he has an advantage over other historians of ordinary life: the battles are singular events, focused on limited

objectives. He does not have to reconstruct the entire life of the participants. But battles are extraordinary events, far distant from routine life, and after the battle ends, most soldiers don't want to talk about them. Part of the debunking role of the historian is to strip away the romantic rhetoric about glory, and recover the genuine confusion, murk, and incompetence revealed in war.

Passion, more than reason, drives men to fight, so the plans of general staffs usually turn out to be irrelevant once the battle starts. Is "military science" [which is taught at MIT to ROTC cadets] a contradiction in terms? On the one hand, military men, almost more than any other profession, pay close attention to the history of their profession; on the other hand, the social scientists and engineers [often academics who never fought in a war] try to make it a systematic discipline. Keegan definitely comes down on the side of broad liberal education and an appreciation of diversity, even for people whose main job it is to kill people and break things. But his speculation that battles will end because they have become too terrible to contemplate [p. 290] has not come true. Turning the battlefield into a virtual reality through electronics has distanced the public and the military from the slaughter so much that militaries seem to be freer to kill than before.