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History of the Art of War

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Hans Delbrück

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Chapter 11, "War and Social Change," asserts that war as an institution has long outlived the warrior societies of which it was once a part. Social change, industrialization in particular, ultimately produces systems that are dominated by technocrats who see war, especially large-scale war, as a disaster. The soldier and his values may not yet be obsolete, but they are increasingly becoming the stuff of myth and legend. Chapter 12, "Military Experience in Literature," is a brief but stimulating overview of the importance of the military experience in enriching humanity's understanding of itself and its relationship to God.

Howard's valedictory lecture dismisses his inaugural effort as "a fairly routine apologia" that he has done "all too little" to implement. His self-judgment is too harsh in both cases. His perception of history as *process* rather than *progress* is a sweeping challenge to the secular abstractions that have shaped historical thought since the Enlightenment: Nature, Reason, the Dialectic. Reification led to deification, with new priesthoods interpreting and enforcing new, secular dogmas. But history is not a "Thing." It is a dynamic generated by freely willed human activities. Free people can make hideously wrong decisions. They can also make right ones. It is the challenge to do good instead of evil that provides opportunities for growth, frameworks for criticism, and imperatives for action. Howard believes that our fate as a species depends on our skill in using our capacities for reason and judgment which in turn are largely shaped by history.

Delbrück, Hans. *History of the Art of War*. Translated by Walter J. Renfro, Jr. Vol. I, *Warfare in Antiquity*. 604pp. \$16.95. Vol. II, *The Barbarian Invasions*. 505pp. \$15.95. Vol. III, *Medieval Warfare*. 711pp. \$19.95. Vol. IV, *Dawn of Modern Warfare*. 487pp. \$15.95. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1990.

Hans Delbrück began his magisterial *History of the Art of Warfare in the Framework of Political History* in 1900 and finished the task in 1924. The present Bison Books paperback edition by Nebraska Press is based upon the third edition of the original German work of 1920, as translated into English by General Renfro for a Greenwood Press hardback publication

between 1975 and 1985. It is both well done and affordable.

Unfortunately, the Nebraska editors chose to delete the very significant second part of the original title, "*in the Framework of Political History*." Therein lies much of both the merits of the work and the cause of Delbrück's vilification in Germany during the 1920s. The University of Berlin, where Delbrück was a member of the faculty for forty years, denied him research funds because in their view he was overly critical of the "Prussian school" of history. A few blocks away the Great General Staff rejected Delbrück's work because it was too analytical for the "Schlieffen school" of military studies. Until the present

of military studies. Until the present republication, only the People's Commissariat for Defense in the former Soviet Union and the the United States Military Academy at West Point had translated his opus.

Delbrück's methodology was straightforward. A product of nineteenth-century German society, Delbrück brought to his studies both conceptual affinities for the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel and the empirical explicitness of Leopold von Ranke. He adopted, especially from the latter, historical realism and rigorous use of contemporary primary accounts. The very notion of *Kritik* that dominates Carl von Clausewitz's writings also found resonance in Delbrück's works.

His fundamental approach to military history was to analyze eyewitness accounts critically and then scrutinize them, in part by subjecting them to modern parallels. One example from volume one must suffice: Herodotus's claim that the Persian army of Xerxes numbered 4.2 million men. Delbrück argued that inasmuch as a Prussian army corps of his day took up about fourteen miles of road without its supply train, and counting the same fourteen miles of road for each thirty thousand Persians. Xerxes's force would have taken up two thousand miles of road in its line of march. In other words, the vanguard of this Persian force would have arrived at Thermopylae at about the same time the rear guard was about to set out from Susa, on the far side of the Tigris River!

Admittedly, today Delbrück's work appears uneven. There is a definite Germano-centric bias (especially in the second volume) as well as a general Teutonic arrogance in dismissing the writings of others. Additionally, more recent examinations of Greek warfare by W.K. Pritchett, and of Roman warfare by Arthur Ferrill, have forced corrections of some of Delbrück's views. But even his most severe critics concede that he almost single-handedly forced ancient and medieval scholars to take seriously the study of warfare. Also, if his work is viewed in its proper context (i.e., in *the Framework of Political History*), it remains without rival among military studies both in scope and as critical analysis.

One final quibble. Given that the volumes were completed in 1924 and that Delbrück died in 1929, an introductory essay on the historian and his craft would have been of immense value.

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Pfizer, Gregory M. *Samuel Eliot Morison's Historical World.*

Boston: Northeastern Univ. Press, 1991. 367pp. \$29.95

Samuel Morison offered Gregory Pfizer access to his personal papers on the condition that they not be used to write his biography. Pfizer agreed. Instead, he has recounted the intellectual development of a preeminent American historian who made notable and numerous contributions to the