

Søren Sjøgren, Major
Ph.d.-fellow, Institute for Military Operations, RDDC
Anna Sofie Schøning, Ph.d.
Assistant professor, Institute for Strategy and Wars Studies, RDDC

In what ways do NATO commanders use military history?

History does not repeat itself, and war changes rapidly – in most cases, generalising principles cannot be made from studies of the past. Still, military commanders regularly argue for the importance of military history. In this article, we ask: how do military commanders learn from history, and what do they learn? Based on 30 interviews with NATO commanders and senior staff officers, we explore how non-historians tackle methodological challenges in using history.

The respondents generally favour a very pragmatic approach arguing that lessons can be learned particularly related to the stressors of combat, fog and friction, and challenges of command that are difficult to simulate in exercises. In this way, history serves to train the commander's professional judgement. They also relate history to contemporary doctrine and use historical examples to set expectations for subordinates' behaviour. However, the respondents are simultaneously aware of methodological pitfalls and express sentiments that they are currently not using military history to its full potential.

We analyse the conducted interviews using history theory leaning on an anthropological understanding of history inspired by German historian Reinhart Koselleck. This allows us a more open approach to investigating how military history is used in military practice, rather than merely assessing whether the expressed uses live up to dominant methodological standards of academic history.

We conclude that the study of military history serves different purposes depending on the specific context. These purposes demand different degrees of rigour. History is used instrumentally within the military profession, and for some purposes, there is a lesser need to be methodologically rigid. However, reflection and being distinctive with what generalisations are made and how based on the study of the past and to what end is always necessary. This, we argue, is where the professional historian might add value to the profession; by helping practitioners navigate methodological challenges and provide counterexamples and critical questions if dogmatism arises and thus help build reflexive and historically informed military commanders.