

The Development of War Studies at King's College London

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This article surveys the origins and development of War Studies at King's College London from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. While in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the growth of military studies at King's was sporadic, the two world wars, the Cold War and post-cold war conflicts drove the rapid expansion of War Studies. This article describes how the department has changed from one focused on military history and strategic studies to one that tackles a range of contemporary security issues from many analytical perspectives and methodological approaches. It concludes with some personal observations about the challenges faced by the Department of War Studies as a scholarly community and as a collective research effort.

King's College London is unique among leading research universities in hosting the world's largest faculty devoted to the study of war. There are of course other prestigious institutions that host big departments of international relations and global affairs, but what makes War Studies King's distinct is that the inter-disciplinary study of war is the defining purpose. The development of War Studies is the topic of this paper. My goal is to provide readers with an overview of how the college obtained its standing in the field. That history reflects the larger pattern of change in the character of armed conflict from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twenty first century: from a period of improvisation and sporadic developments to one of scholarly professionalization and permanent and expanding academic faculties.

I

The relationship between King's College London and the British military and the state goes back to its foundation in 1829. The college was founded by a group of politicians and Churchmen who wanted a Church of England alternative education institution to the radical and secular University College London ('Godless Gower Street'). Prominent among them was the Prime Minister and victor over Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo, the Duke of Wellington.¹ Despite Wellington's involvement though, the college did not host military studies for the first two decades of its existence. A Department of Military Science was founded in 1848, the year of revolutionary turmoil and violence across Europe. Fear of impending revolutions and the prospect of armed conflict on the continent created a demand for army officers. The Royal Military College at Sandhurst did not possess the capacity to meet the full requirements for the British Army. At the initiative of the Principal and theologian, Reverend Richard W. Jelf, King's College London organized as an act of

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¹ Hearnshaw, *The centenary history of King's College*, pp. 13-96.

public service an education programme for aspiring officer cadets. The course consisted of three parts: divinity, including the study of the Bible and the Catechism; history, languages, mathematics and natural philosophy; the third was military education, which included strategy, tactics, fortifications and surveying. In total forty-one candidates earned their military education at King's. However, the Department of Military Science did not flourish. The top brass of the British Army felt unease about military training that was not under their control or at least supervision, especially training conducted in the main by clergymen. Despite the outbreak of the Crimean War in October 1853 and the resulting expansion of the British army and navy, enrolments in the programme dwindled and the department closed in 1859.²

Even with the closure of Military Science in 1859, the study of military engineering and military history continued at King's. However, the college was still for the most part an Anglican seminary run by churchman for mainly ecclesiastical purposes. A key development occurred in 1885 with the appointment of the mathematician and historian John Knox Laughton in 1885 to the Professorship of Modern History. Laughton taught in the Department of Literature and Science, which prepared boys between the ages of 15 and 18 for further study at Oxford or Cambridge or for entry into the civil service. He made great strides in advancing the study of what we would today call 'strategic studies' at King's and in Britain more generally. For example, he co-founded the Naval Record Society. He also brought a mathematical rigor to what he described as the 'scientific study' of naval history.³ In 1914, the year that Laughton retired and the year that the First World War broke out in Europe, Military Science was once again approved of as a subject for the BSc general degrees, and was taught during the war under the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Engineering. The college also became a centre for military related scientific research.⁴ After the First World War, Military Science was once again abolished. It is not clear why that happened, but my guess is that cuts to military spending after what was the most-costly war ever and a sense of a 'new world order' founded on the peaceful resolution of disputes through the League of Nations meant that for many the subject was at best redundant. In 1927, however, the British War Office sponsored the foundation of a Military Studies Department at King's – the purpose of which was at least in part to assist with the writing of the official history of the 1914-18 war and to prepare young men for military service. In 1943, the Military Studies Department became the Department of War Studies – which continued to operate until 1948.⁵

II

As we have seen, until the end of the Second World War, 'war studies' at King's fell into a pattern of rise, decline and abolition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. It would rise when there was a demand for military studies under the pressure of impending or actual armed conflict and decline when external investments dried up and war seemed a remote concern. That cycle of rise and decline was broken in 1962, in the context of the protracted Cold War and the ever-present danger of the nuclear arms race, when the War Studies Department that I belong to was established. Our 'foundational myth' credits this success to the heroic efforts and stellar reputation of one man, Sir Michael Howard. And, in

² Ibid., pp. 176-8.

³ Lambert, *The foundations of naval history*, pp. 226-8, 233.

⁴ Hearnshaw, *The centenary history of King's College*, pp. 460-7.

⁵ Huelin's *King's College London*, pp. 92-100, does not discuss either the pre-war or wartime departments.

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fact, as Brian Holden-Reid has argued, it is difficult to think of anyone who had a greater influence in post-war Britain on military history and contemporary military policy and strategic studies than Michael Howard. Born in 1922, he came from a family of Quakers. In 1942, while studying for a degree in history at Oxford University, he was appointed an office cadet in the Cold Stream Guards, one of the elite units of the British Army. He saw combat in Italy from 1943 to the end of the war. After the war, he completed his education and wrote the wartime history of his regiment.⁶ At that time his talents as a lecturer and a writer was noticed by a group of senior academics at the University of London who were trying to re-introduce military studies in the curriculum. He joined the History Department at King's College London in 1947; six years later his title was changed to Lecturer in Military Studies. At that time, he was writing a history of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71 and lobbied for more appointments in the field of military history. The story of what happened is not entirely clear, but what we do know is that the head of the History Department refused to expand military history and objected to Howard's high profile work as a journalist on strategic matters.⁷ Even so, Howard was an extremely popular lecturer and in great demand as an advisor on UK and US defence policy. His success was difficult to deny and perhaps in an effort to rid the History Department of military studies he was encouraged to establish a one-year MA programme in War Studies and in 1962 a small department by that name.

The reason why I am dwelling on Michael Howard is that to this day most of us still adhere to the humane values and the approach to the study of war he advocated. First, in the field of military history he pioneered the 'war and society' approach – in other words a military history that looked well beyond operational history to examine, the social, political and cultural origins and impact of armed conflicts. Second, he argued that the study of history needed to engage with contemporary debates about foreign and defence policy. For example, his 1972 book *The Continental Commitment* explored the long history of Britain's ambivalent involvement in European politics and advocated Britain's continuing contribution to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) of substantial ground forces to West Germany's defence. Third, Howard believed that war was too complex and multifaceted to be studied solely from one discipline. It demanded the collaborative efforts of the humanities, the social sciences and other disciplines.⁸

The first four decades of the Department's existence exhibited these features. Howard and others such as Brian Bond, Brian Holden-Reid, Michael and Saki Dockrill wrote of the two world wars and the Cold War from a broad perspective. Members of the department such as Lawrence Martin, Lawrence Freedman and Beatrice Heuser regularly contributed to policy debates about nuclear deterrence and foreign policy. Freedman in fact combined the roles of contemporary strategic analyst and historian – he helped to establish with Michael Howard the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) and he was the official historian of the 1982 Falkland Islands War.⁹ Although until the early 2000s the department never exceeded about 6 to 8 full and part-time faculty, it always included a range of scholars from various disciplines including international relations specialists, sociologists and philosophers.¹⁰

In the 1980s and 1990s the faculty of War Studies was still never greater than the number

⁶ Reid, 'Michael Howard', pp. 869-904.

⁷ Howard, *Captain professor*, pp. 140-52.

⁸ Reid, 'Michael Howard'.

⁹ Howard, *Captain professor*, pp. 153-65; Freedman, *The official history of the Falklands Campaign* 2 vols.

¹⁰ See for instance Paskins and Dockrill, *Ethics of war*.

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of people you could fit into the back of a London taxi. Certainly, the full and part time staff never exceeded 12; they taught one MA programme of about 30 students per year and a cohort of doctoral candidates of about 50. When I was hired, I was the first new faculty member to join the department in five years. But the day I joined the Department everything began to change dramatically; that day was 11 September 2001. In the last fifteen years, with the onset of wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East and the security challenges posed by terrorist attacks, War Studies changed in scale and scope. The Department grew at a remarkable rate. We now have 50 permanent faculty and about 10 part timers. We have 30 research staff, which includes post-docs on short term contracts and permanent researchers. For a department that up until recently did not teach undergraduates, we now have 700 in total and that number is set to rise to about 1000. We have 400 MA students, and close to 200 PhD students. This growth was not limited to our central campus on the Strand. In the Spring of 2000 the college won a government contract to provide professional military education to the British armed forces and we established the Department of Defence Studies, which is located at the UK's Joint Command and Staff College at Shrivenham, Oxfordshire. The Department of Defence Studies is now in fact much bigger than War Studies – it has 65 permanent faculty and a large number of research staff and non-students. The two departments are now organized into one School of Security Studies, which is part of the Faculty of Social Science and Public Policy. No doubt Reverend Jelf would be astonished if he could visit the college now and see how his original vision of King's providing military education had been realised over a century later.

III

Since September 2001 not only has the rate of growth in War and Defence Studies been astonishing, but the focus has widened too. When I was hired in September 2001 most of the faculty were historians studying the two world wars and the onset of the Cold War; now most are political scientists dealing with a wide range of contemporary security issues; back in 2001 most of the faculty were British men, but now we have a very international faculty with a large number of Americans, Canadians, European. The gender balance within the faculty has improved markedly in the last five years. That growth in diversity is also true of our students. The change in focus and range of interests is also reflected in our teaching. From a starting position in 2000 of no undergraduate students in the department, we now have two programmes, Bachelor of Arts (BA) War Studies and BA International Relations. The BA International Relations also has a joint BA programme with History in International History.

The biggest proliferation in programmes of study is at the Master of Arts (MA) level – we now have 14 specialised MAs. Some of these are small such as Science and Security and South Asia and Global Security; some are medium sized such as *War Studies*, *International Peace & Security*, and *Terrorism, Security & Society*; and some are huge such as *International Relations*, *Conflict, Security & Development* and *Intelligence Studies*. A lot of these programmes may sound similar but each has its own distinct character and emphasis ranging from the practical such as *Science & Security* or *Counter Proliferation Studies* to the very abstract such as *International Relations*. *International Peace & Security* for example is in fact an advanced course in international relations theory for international lawyers; *Science & Security* is a very small programme of only 5 or 6 students a year but it

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is funded by the MacArthur Foundation specifically to offer scientists a security studies education – something that the foundation believes is essential for future security. The MA in *Intelligence Studies* which attracts about 90 students a year is unique in that it is taught with input and assistance from former practitioners. The important contribution of former officials is exemplified by Professor Sir David Omand's contribution to our teaching. He is a former head of the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), the UK's signals intelligence agency, and author of important scholarly contributions to intelligence studies.¹¹ Most of the graduates find employment in the risk analysis or open source intelligence sector in banking and international business and increasingly in cyber security firms. We also offer a version of this MA to the UK cabinet office to train intelligence analysts – an initiative that began with the investigation into the 2003 Iraq Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) intelligence failure.¹²

Let me now turn to our research. Owing to UK-wide government programmes for measuring research publications and income we are not only encouraged to publish but also to win major research grants. Thus, our total research income in 2015 was £15 million, but that figure does not include money for research that comes direct from UK government as part of the central grant for funding the university.¹³ The full list of our research centres and groups offers a broad sense of the Department's main research projects:

Research Centres	Research Groups
Centre for Defence Studies	Afghanistan Studies
Centre for Science & Security Studies	Africa Research Group
European Centre for Energy & Resource Security	Arts & Conflict Hub
International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation	Asian Security & Warfare
Sir Michael Howard Centre for the History of War	Conflict, Security & Development
King's Centre for Military Health Research	Foresight: Early Warning & Preventive Policy
Marjan Centre for the Study of War and the Non-Human Sphere Research	Insurgency
Centre in International Relations	Intelligence & International Security
	Laughton Naval History
	Private Military & Security
	Russian & Eurasian Security
	War Crimes

The twelve research groups include PhD students and two of them are organized by students. Some were once very large such as the War Crimes group but student interest in that area has declined; Afghanistan and counter-insurgency remains core interests among PhDs but we no longer have very many faculty working in those fields any longer – a reflection of Britain's withdrawal from the country and I think a decline in faith of counter-insurgency as a kind of proxy activity for building stable democratic states. As you can also see from the list above we have eight research centres; each of these either has a large research grant to fund it or it is associated with a particular MA programme. I will not run

¹¹ Omand, *Securing the state*.

¹² Goodman and Omand, 'What analysts need to understand', pp. 1-12.

¹³ For more information see the *2014 Research Excellence Framework* submission and results for King's College London Politics and International Studies see <http://results.ref.ac.uk/Results/BySubmission/613> (Last accessed on 30 April 2017)

through each of them in detail but instead let me highlight some of the most important centres, the ones that I hope will give you a sense of our current major research themes, which also naturally reflect pressing issues in the field of international security more generally.

- The **Centre for Defence Studies** is our main connection with the UK government in terms of advising on defence policy. It includes several former officials and most of its research output is directly related to current policy debates. So, recent studies focused on ‘convention force deterrence’ and another on ‘defence estates’. Staff often appear in front of parliamentary committees to give evidence and offer advice. They also provide professional development training for the UK MoD, various police forces and foreign governments. A good example of this sort of engagement with government was Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman’s role in the Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq War and the WMD intelligence failure.¹⁴
- I have already mentioned that the **Centre for Science and Security** has a McArthur Foundation grant to help fund it but most of its money comes from research and training related to counter-proliferation of WMD, nuclear disarmament and arms control. They also have a very important programme of research into the prevention of nuclear terrorism in cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the US Department of Energy.
- **The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR)** is probably our most widely known research unit. Launched in 2008 thanks to a very generous private donation, it aims to provide policy makers and security services with rigorous research into radicalisation and political violence with a particular focus on Jihadism and the waves of foreign volunteers who had flocked to Syria to fight. The centre’s director has given evidence to the UN Security Council on the problem of foreign fighters. Dr Shiraz Maher, the deputy director, is the leading expert on Jihadism in Syria and Iraq.¹⁵
- Our newest research is the **Sir Michael Howard Centre for the History of War**. King’s College London has the largest concentration of historian of war in the world, but unfortunately there was no outward looking unit or identity to draw attention to that fact. Although the centre has only been active since the summer of 2014, it has already hosted several conference and public events, including the launch of the *Cambridge History of the Second World War*, and many events related to centenary of the First World War.

This brief overview should offer you a sense of some of the main research themes we focus upon, but I should also take a moment and mention some of our latest initiatives, which includes a new research initiative on reintegrating former female combatants in northern Sri Lanka, and a large grant to explore the relationship between the Arts and reconciliation in former war torn regions. As you will note, the college’s research in the field of war studies has shifted with the development of new challenges in international security.

¹⁴ For the report of the Iraq Inquiry see <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/the-report/> (Last accessed on 30 April 2017)

¹⁵ Neumann, *Radicalized*; Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*.

IV

By way of conclusion, let me turn to the difficulties and challenges in developing War Studies as an academic community and as a larger research project. Certainly, the biggest challenge is simply answering the question: *What is War Studies?* As you will have noted, what that means has evolved and expanded rapidly over the last fifteen years. Frankly we don't even try to define it – apart from the regular intervals when we are forced to make a concrete statement by the institution or UK national assessments processes in teaching quality. We usually simply refer back to the defining principles laid out by Michael Howard – inter-disciplinary research, a keen sense of history and a strong connection with real world problems. Clearly this creates some problems for students, who know they want to come to us to learn but do not always know what to expect. I should underscore the fact that the only time when we have had disputes in the department is when we have tried to *define* ourselves – live and let live so long as you work on scholarly research related to war seems to be the most stable formula. A related problem to the one of a lack of an agreed definition of 'war studies' is a lack of intellectual cohesion. When the department could fit into the back of a taxi it was easy for everyone to know about each other's research and to participate in a joint seminar programme. Nowadays, on any given day of the week in term time we have five or six different seminars going on at the same time on any one of three campuses. Every attempt to organize a faculty research seminar has failed and I think will fail because we simply are too big and too diverse for that sort of single-minded cohesion and effort. At a time when the problems posed by war are so diverse, this flexibility of approach is in fact an asset.

While one of our great strengths is that we are close to governments and we have had an impact on policy making in various countries and a number of our faculty have participated in official inquiries, defence reviews, official histories and so on, we are sometimes perceived by colleagues outside of King's as being too close to the state. This perception is mistaken. There is no single political or scholarly consensus among the faculty that frames our research. Like Michael Howard himself, many of the current faculty have been for instance staunch critics of the 'War on Terror' and the 2003 invasion of Iraq.¹⁶ At King's we are in fact a *very* long way away from the 1840s, when Principal Jelf sought to educate young officer cadets to 'harmonize' the College's activities with those of the Church of England and the British state.¹⁷ The reality is that in a globalised world troubled by war the faculty need to be sufficiently independent and critical to offer rigorous and relevant scholarly work to those who need and want our knowledge and understanding, but also close enough to governments, international organizations and other institutions for the access to conduct that research. Striking the right balance requires the application of good judgement and sound scholarly ethics.

¹⁶ Reid, 'Michael Howard', pp. 901-2; Howard, *Captain professor*, pp. 2017-20.

¹⁷ Hearnshaw, *Centenary history of King's College*, pp. 176-8.

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