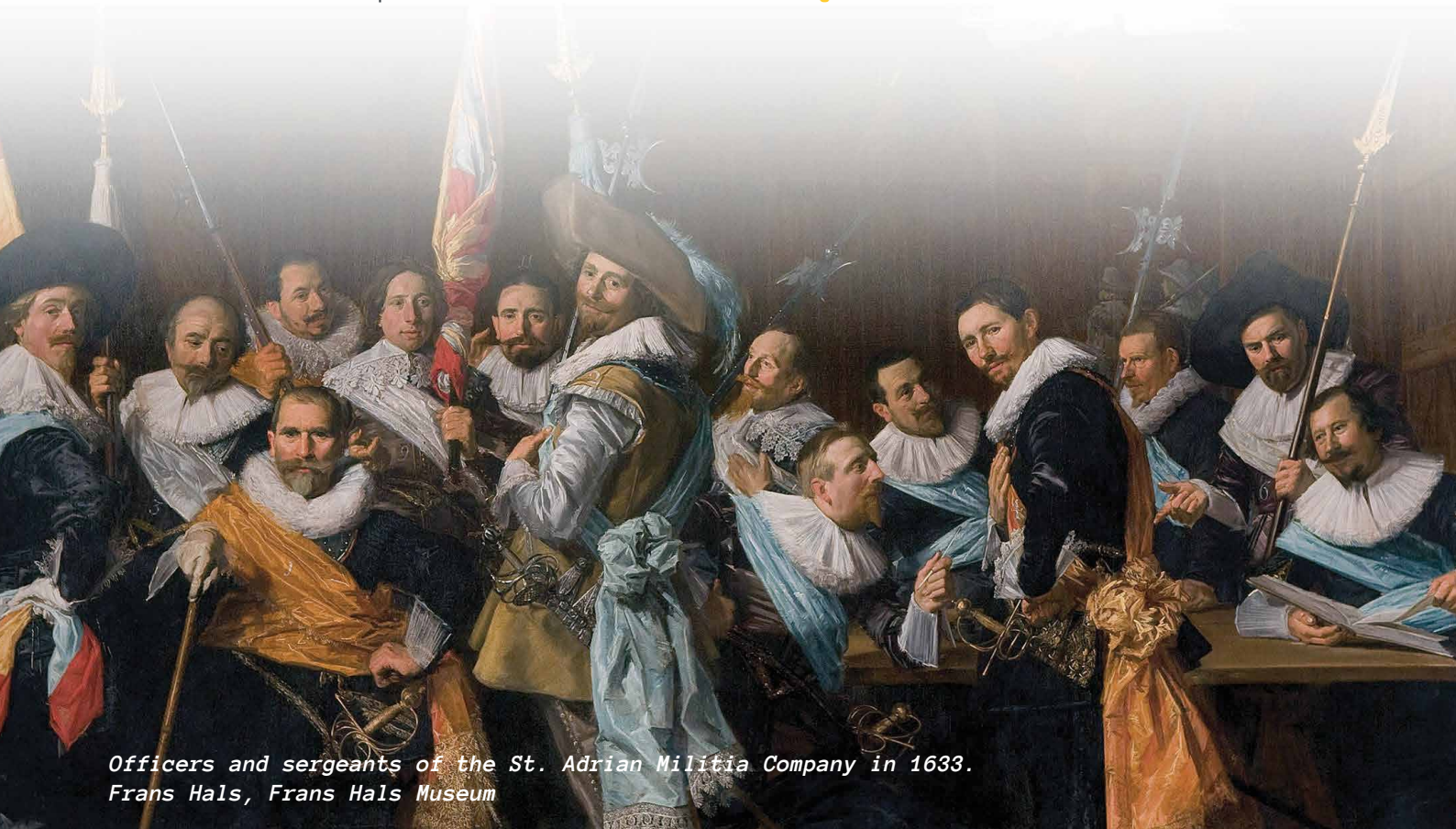




**Estonian
War Museum**
GENERAL LAIDONER MUSEUM



**ESTONIAN NATIONAL
DEFENCE COLLEGE**



*Officers and sergeants of the St. Adrian Militia Company in 1633.
Frans Hals, Frans Hals Museum*

Estonian War Museum–General Laidoner Museum and the Estonian National Defence College call for paper proposals to a military history conference

THE PAST – A SOLDIER’S GUIDE FOR THE PRESENT? EXPERIENCE, HISTORY AND THEORY IN MILITARY EDUCATION

Tartu, 31 May 2018

Military historian Martin van Creveld distinguishes between experience, history and theory as levels of cognition illuminating the nature of the soldier’s trade. “War is a practical business – at times so much so as to discourage abstract thought about it ... The objective is victory, not dishing up all sorts of insights.” To fire one’s weapon or command a platoon, little history or theory is needed, but at higher levels more factors enter the picture and one cannot count on experience alone: “at the highest level of war, there is hardly any aspect of human behavior which does not impinge on war’s conduct.” Napoleon, who formally had the education of a lieutenant, knew that any aspiring commander should “peruse again and again the campaigns of Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, Gustavus Adolphus, [the French commander] Turenne, Eugene and Frederick the Great... This is the only means of becoming a great captain.” Indeed, it is better to learn from the experience of others than from the blood spilled by one’s own troops.¹

From Creveld’s point of view, history is experience properly researched, organised and presented, but without theory, any lesson of history will always remain obscure. Most leaders do not have the necessary experience, nor are they geniuses who can instinctively distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant. History needs theory, but theory is neither a manual nor guidance toward self-improvement. “At its best it is simply an attempt to codify the examples, analogies and principles history may offer. It dismantles the subject into its parts; separates the essential from the inessential; examines the nature of each; and analyses their relationship with each other as well as other things. Finally it puts them together again in ways that will enlighten and assist those who peruse it,” suggests van Creveld. Military historian Michael Howard, who fought in the Second World War, noted the difficulty of persuading professional soldiers of the utility of history. Officers, knowledgeable of the technical complexities of the modern battlefield, are skeptical about the idea that the

experiences of a Gustav Adolphus or Helmuth von Moltke might be relevant in the age of electronic sensors, laser-guided missiles and robotics. It does not help that history seldom provides clear-cut prescriptions: “Clio is like the Delphic Oracle: it is only in retrospect, and usually too late, that we can understand what she was trying to say,” warns Howard.²

The common idea that officers dwell too much on the past and are therefore ill-prepared for the future is not true, suggests another authority on military history, Williamson Murray: “The fact is that military organisations, for the most part, study what makes them feel comfortable about themselves, not the uncongenial lessons of past conflicts.” It is for this reason that most armies learn the hard way, in combat and usually at a heavy cost, lessons that were readily apparent at the end of the last war.³

Looking at the present tensions building up in Europe and the Baltic Sea region, it is obvious that history is playing a much more important role than was expected a few years ago. Russia’s invasion of Georgia and Ukraine destroyed the post-Cold War security architecture; events in Crimea and Donbass in 2014 made it absolutely clear that history had not ended after all, as had been euphorically anticipated at the end of the Cold War. In autumn 2014 the US army introduced a new operating concept, how to *Win in a Complex World*, which acknowledged US mistakes in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Lieutenant General Herbert R. McMaster noted that many blunders could have been avoided if there had not been the mistaken assumption that technology had fundamentally altered the nature of warfare.⁴ With uncertainties about the future of Europe’s security as well as about developments in warfare increasing, it seems that experience and history, organised by theory, still remain important tools for orientation.

The Estonian War Museum-General Laidoner Museum and the Estonian National Defence College will convene an international conference to study the importance of history in military education, training and doctrine. What is the proper relationship between experience, the study of history and theory? What is the position of history in military pedagogy? To what extent should armed forces,

beside tactics, study the political, cultural and social contexts of fighting war? How important is it to understand the civilian perspective on the conduct of war? How can one assure that history is taught “in width, in depth, and in context”, as Michael Howard suggested – meaning the tracing of the development of warfare in a long continuum, analysing it in detail (battles and campaigns), and counting in political, social and economic factors?

The Estonian War Museum and the Estonian National Defence College invite proposals for papers on the following topics, on which chronological limitations have not been set:

- * Past experience as teacher and guide for the military commander,
- * The study and the teaching of military history in armed forces,
- * National traditions in the research and teaching of military history,
- * Academic and popular interpretations of past wars commissioned by armed forces,
- * Histories of wars as pillars of national identities and state propaganda,
- * The use of past campaigns in officers’ and soldiers’ education and training,
- * Transnational aspects of the officer’s profession, knowledge transfer and military history,
- * Military history in warfighting concepts and doctrines,
- * Military history in military pedagogy in the past and the present.

Please send an abstract of up to 4,000 characters and a brief, one-page CV in English or Estonian by **15 February 2018** to conference@esm.ee. The length of presentations will be 20 minutes. The working languages of the conference will be English and Estonian. All the presentations in Estonian will be translated into English and vice versa. Articles based on the presentations will be published in the Estonian Yearbook of Military History in 2019. The Estonian War Museum will cover the travel and accommodation costs of speakers. The conference is held by the Estonian War Museum-General Laidoner Museum and the Estonian National Defence College; it will take place on 31 May 2018 in Tartu.

REFERENCES:

¹ Martin van Creveld, keynote at the conference “Visions of War: Experience, Imagination and Predictions of War in the Past and the Present,” Estonian War Museum – General Laidoner Museum, 19–20 April 2016, Tallinn.

² Michael Howard, “The Use and Abuse of Military History,” *The RUSI Journal* 107:625 (1962): 4–10.

³ Williamson Murray, “Thinking about Innovation,” *Naval War College Review* 54:2 (Spring 2001): 119–129.

⁴ H. R. McMaster, “Continuity and Change: The Army operating concept and clear thinking about future war,” *Military Review* (March/April 2015), 6–20.

