

NUOVA **ANTOLOGIA** 
MILITARE
RIVISTA INTERDISCIPLINARE DELLA SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI STORIA MILITARE

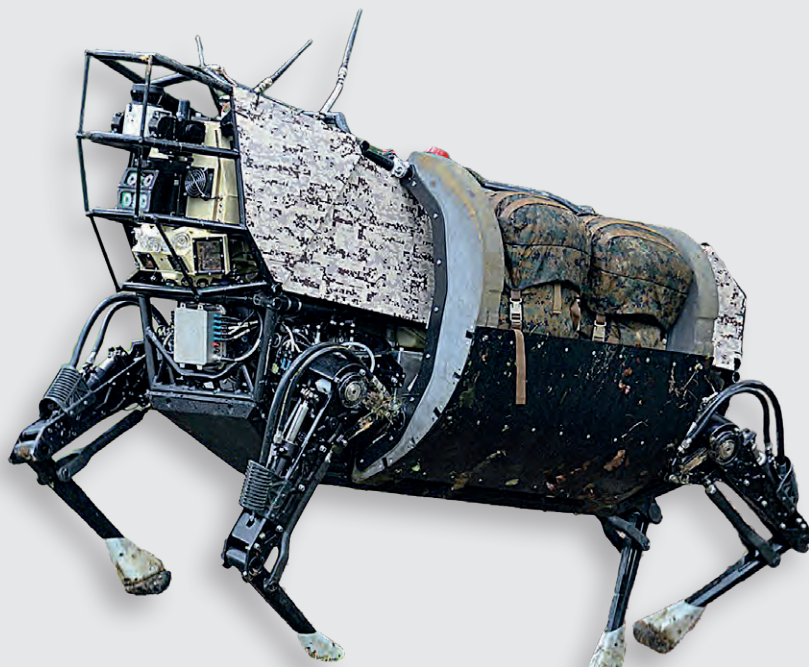
N. 3
2022

Fascicolo 12. Novembre 2022

Storia Militare Contemporanea

a cura di

PIERO CIMBOLLI SPAGNESI



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Nuova Antologia Militare

Rivista interdisciplinare della Società Italiana di Storia Militare
Periodico telematico open-access annuale (www.nam-sism.org)
Registrazione del Tribunale Ordinario di Roma n. 06 del 30 Gennaio 2020



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For the Journal: © Società Italiana di Storia Militare
(www.societaitalianastoriamilitare@org)

Grafica: Nadir Media Srl - Via Giuseppe Veronese, 22 - 00146 Roma
info@nadirmedia.it

Gruppo Editoriale Tab Srl -Viale Manzoni 24/c - 00185 Roma
www.tabedizioni.it

ISSN: 2704-9795

ISBN Fascicolo 978-88-9295-585-1

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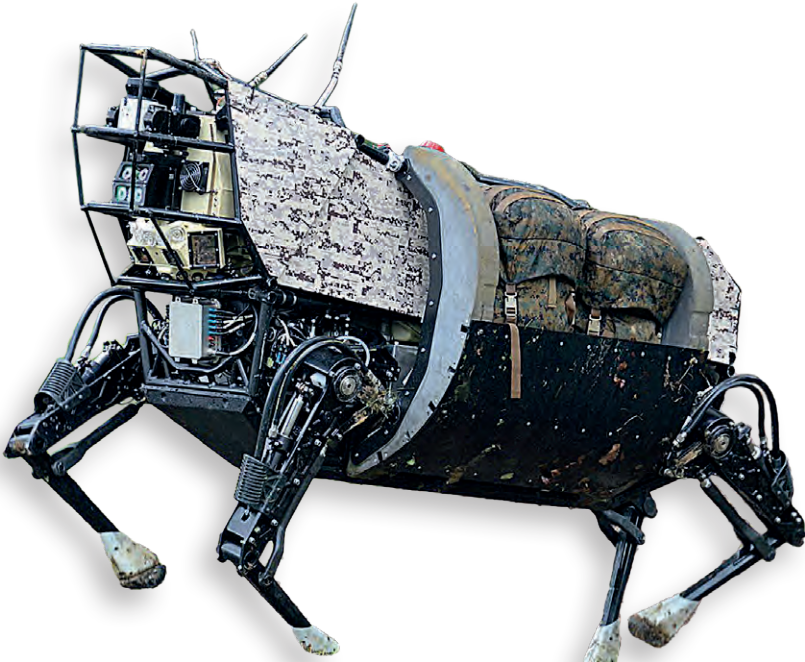
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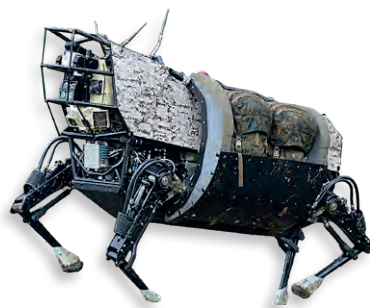
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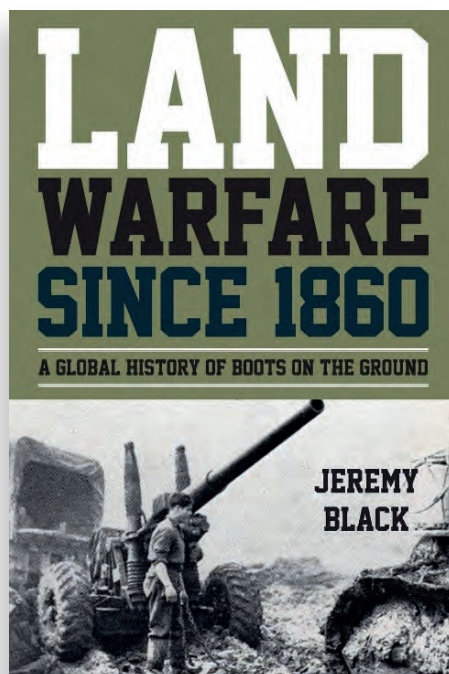


Legged Squad Support System robot prototype, 2021, DARPA image.
Tactical Technology Office, Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency,
U.S. Department of Defense, 2012 (wikipedia commons)

JEREMY BLACK

Land Warfare Since 1860:
A Global History of Boots on the Ground

Rowman & Littlefield. 2019. viii + 279pp. \$35.00.



Few books can be more relevant than Jeremy Black's "Global History of Boots on the Ground". The images of Russian soviet-era tanks crossing the Ukrainian borders and the heavy shelling of Ukrainian positions by Moscow's multiple rocket launchers have shocked the Europeans, who reluctantly had to come to terms with the fact that land warfare has come back in Europe. Many observers are also very surprised by what they are seeing in the field and did not expect this conflict to play out in this way. In many aspects, like the use of artillery, this conflict very much resembles wars that many observers consider belonging to the past. More than seventy years since the last conventional high-in-

tensity war between two or more countries in Europe, most of us lack the skills and tools which are necessary to understand what is going on in the field. Black's book is very helpful in this regard. Not only he helps us understanding what we are seeing in the field, but also, and most importantly, he teaches us why the character of this war is surprising even the most skilled analysts.

Many modern Western commentators have for long believed that land warfare had become obsolete. Since 1860, even if not always explicitly stated, this idea has recurred with frequency. According, the destructiveness entailed by the so-called advent of "modern" warfare had the effects of transforming land warfare in a struggle between the resources of the two opponents. Those supporting this idea argued that the country with more resources is the one who will prevail. Moreover, they think that the beginning of nuclear age had further diminished the importance of land combat, making tactical and operational issues almost irrelevant. Thus, for many years, the focus has been on high tech confrontation, mainly based on air power, relegating land warfare to a sort of "rump" of air conflict. These ideas have found new emphasis with the end of the longest land conflict of the modern era, the American war in Afghanistan. With the conclusion of the longest conflict ever fought by US forces, the Pentagon is now free to focus on its high-tech confrontation with China in the Indo-Pacific. Here, the war they are preparing for is a multi-domain conflict, where the US naval, air, and amphibious forces will play the most important role, relegating the army to a supporting service.

This form of reasoning is implicitly showing one of the main pitfalls that have constantly affected our way of studying the history of land warfare. We have constantly underrated the social and political context of the conflict we studied, which in practical terms has led many historians to underscore the strategic level of the conflict. However, it is very often this level which imposes the character of warfare. Furthermore, we have frequently ignored that military history is political in nature, and that what to cover and how to cover it is not a value-free decision. Therefore, we have mostly focused our analysis on Western conflicts and have frequently underscored many of the most important wars occurred beyond Europe. This led us to generalize the character of Western wars.

The main idea that Black transmits to the reader is that there is no essential character of warfare. The history of land warfare is an history of variation. To allow the read to grasp this variation, the author relies on two fundamental tools which together constitute the most relevant aspects of the books. The first con-

cerns the scope of the analysis. Black's view of history is far from being Western-centric. He goes much beyond Europe, and includes every major conflict occurred in the world since 1860. No major war is excluded from his work. This choice implies a payoff in the level of detail of the analysis, but Black's aim is not merely a descriptive one. He wants to emphasize variety, but to do that he is forced to broaden his analysis to include an assessment of the contexts in which the wars he describes have taken place. Thus, he changes his level of analysis very frequently, shifting from the tactical to the political-strategic level. This choice is a fundamental one. As the author argues "the political dimension (of military history) is particularly salient if due attention is paid to strategy", which in its turn is very much shaped by socio-political factors. Seen with this light, Black's books does not merely tell a story of land warfare, but also a story of how land warfare has been narrated.

Black's analysis is chronologically structured in eight chapters, each of one provides an assessment of the major wars fought in this period. He also includes a final chapter dedicated to its ideas on the future of land warfare. As said, Black does not exclude any major conflict occurred in the time span considered. Its analysis includes wars waged in Latin America, like the War of the Pacific (1879-84) fought between Chile, Bolivia and Peru, and gives ample space to conflicts waged in India, China, and the Middle East. However, the variation in the character of war is evident even in the narration of the main Western conflicts, such as World War I and World War II. Thanks to an ample consideration of the strategic level of the conflict, Black's narration of these wars challenges many conventional explanatory accounts. In his view, for example, placing the strategic dimension first allows for a better understanding of the real "face of battle" of World War I. He shows how what the conventional wisdom presents as a tactical impasse of the trenches was in reality subordinate to a strategic impasse. Strategy, nor tactics and operations, was the key scale of the war. Trenches were significant, indeed, but they could be broken, as with the German Hindenburg Line in 1918. The problems were posed by force-spatios ratios of the war, especially on the Western Front. It was the available manpower who made it possible to hold the front line with strength and provide reserve. As a fact, where force-space ratio was lower, as in the eastern front, it was much easier to achieve breakthroughs. Black makes a similar argument in the narration of World War II. He criticizes the exaggerated emphasis posed by contemporary and later commentators on Germany *Blitzkrieg*

and mechanized warfare, saying that the success of Germany in many contexts, for example, in the French campaign in 1940, was more the result of poor Allied strategy than of German weaponry and doctrine. Mechanized warfare was also very seductive because of the interest in mechanization which was widespread in societies in that period, something that helped give the impression that combat had changed. This led many observers to underplay the role of many other weapons, such as artillery, who despite all, was the principal killer of combatants in World War One and Two.

The way we read history of warfare can be influenced by many other societal and political factors. One is certainly the idea that we have of the future. Black makes many examples of this phenomenon. Consider, for example, the lessons that the US military had drawn from the Vietnam war. When the US found themselves fighting a “war among the people” in Iraq and Afghanistan, many observers criticized them for not having learnt the lessons of the Vietnam war. This reasoning, in the author’s view, is sometime appropriate, but he contends it, saying that it would have been feckless for the US to focus on this kind of warfare, while the Soviet conventional forces were still posing a conventional threat on Europe. The future war that they were imagining was a conventional high-tech war, mainly based on airpower, against the URSS. This influenced the way they read the Vietnamese experience.

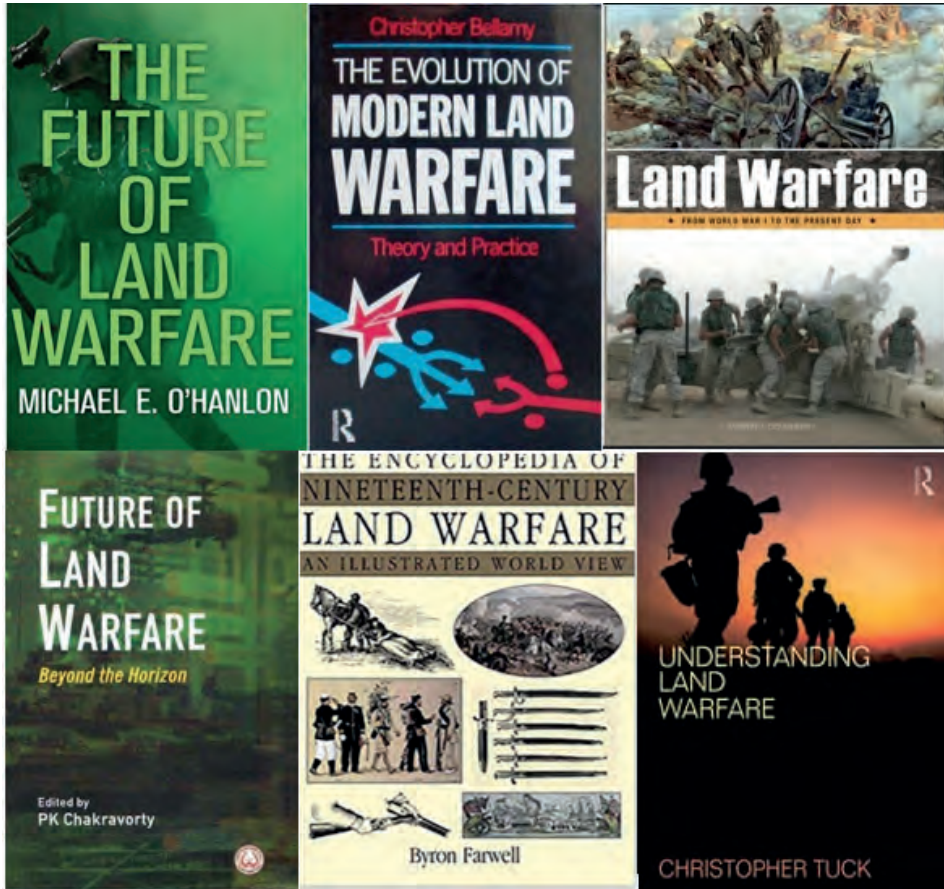
The way we read wars can also be influenced by societal features. Nothing more than the period prior to World Word I is more illustrative of this bias. Prior to the War, Western military observers had many opportunities to assess how modern wars were fought. For example, many Western countries sent observers to Manchuria to study the Russo-Japanese war (1904-05). However, the lessons that they drew were biased. They did not appreciate the importance of trench warfare and came back to Europe convinced that frontal assaults was the real successful tactic of the war. Black argues that one key factor which determined this biased vision was the so called “cult of the offensive”, something that he considers a vestige of the preindustrial world in which the elite still dreamed of the glorious knights who charged the barbarians that endangered the Western world. For example, the famous “libretta rossa” developed by Italian Army general Luigi Cadorna, in fact reflected a widespread tendency in Western armies, based on the belief that only armies imbued with the cult of the offensive and with high morale were those which could win in battle.

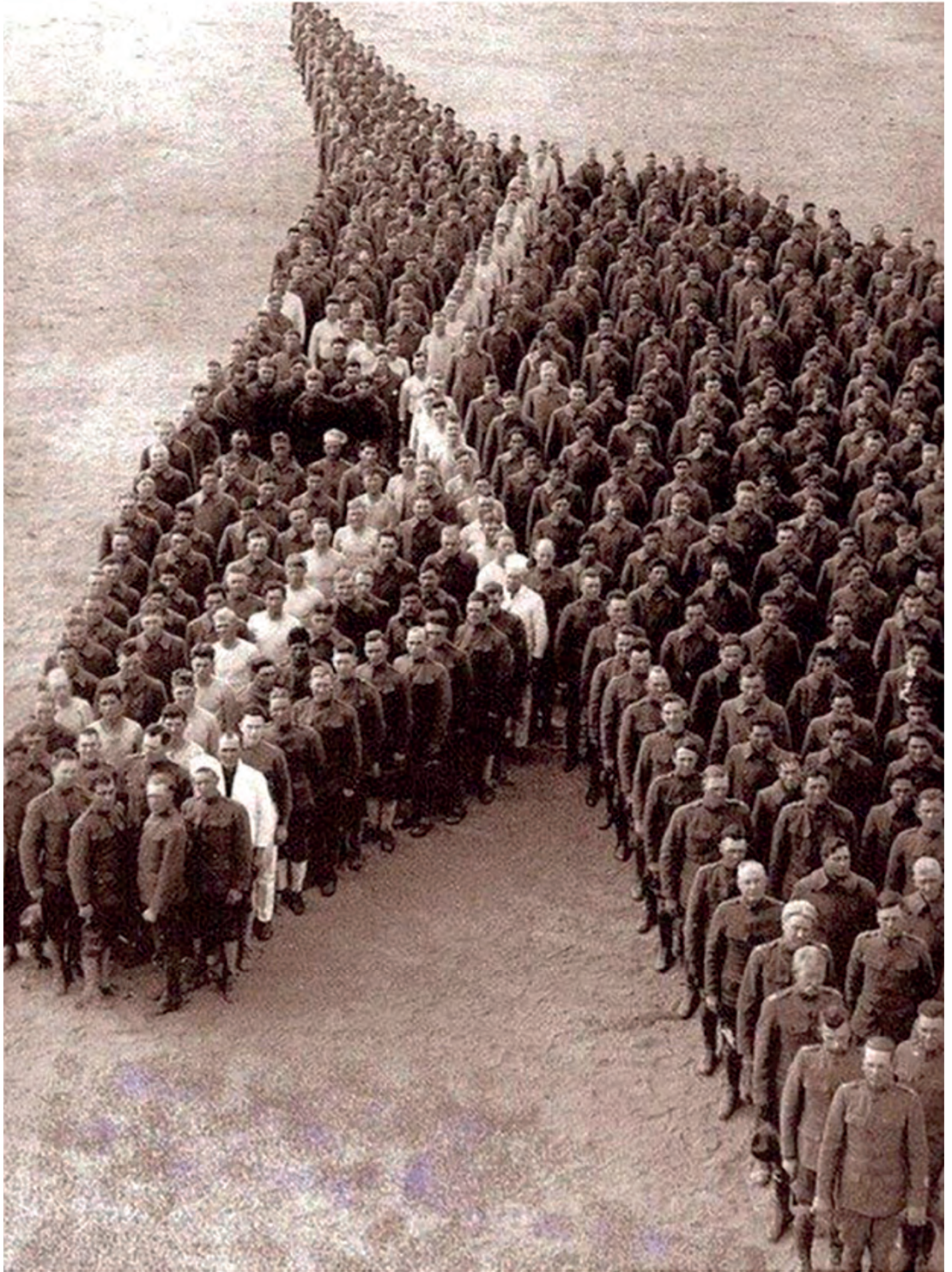
One of the most popular ideas about land warfare is that its importance has been superseded by the changing character of this war. According, this change has made so that, starting from 1860, conflicts' results have been apparently dictated by the respective weight of resources deployed by the two opponents. In this view, war has become "total" and it is now very different from that witnessed prior to the modern period. It now entails a level of destructiveness so high that many aspects, such as tactical issues, are not relevant anymore. Black goes against this view and argues that what is generally called modern warfare is in fact quite familiar with premodern warfare. Resources are far from being the most relevant factor to achieve success in war and Black provides many examples to sustain his argument. Adopting a broader view of warfare after 1945 also shows that nuclear weapons have in fact not made conventional war obsolete. Advancement in technology have not killed many aspects of pre-modern warfare that are still very valid. Black provides many examples to sustain his argument. One of the most interesting concerns the German *Blitzkrieg*. The Germans had good weapons, indeed, but the importance of their tanks and mechanized warfare, in Black's view, was less important for achieving victory than other factors such as the army's doctrine, training, and leadership, together with the stress on flexibility, personal initiative, and action. Tactical issues, such as how best to ensure combined-arms effectiveness, still continue to play a major role.

The book ends with an insightful chapter about the future. Black makes an interesting parallel to today's great power competition and the situation prior to WWI. We have a great power rivalries system, one in which China and Russia are behaving as revisionists power, something akin to Germany of Wilhelm II. And the role of the US vis à vis China much resembles that of the UK vis à vis Germany. Finally, he provides a brief analysis of the future issues which will influence land warfare in the future. His idea of future land warfare does not resemble the high-tech conflict which is being prepared by the Pentagon in these years. Black believes that the pace of population growth will result in an increased numbers of irregulars in the field, and that the cost of technological innovation could lead many countries to put emphasis on less expensive but still effective weapons.

Cap. MATTEO MAZZIOTTI DI CELSO

Italian Army





650 Officers and Enlisted Men of Auxiliary Remount Depot N° 326 Camp Cody, N. M., In a Symbolic Head Pose of "The Devil", Saddle Horse ridden by Maj. Frank Brewer, remount commander / Photo by Almeron Newman, *Rear 115 N. Gold Ave., Deming, N.M.*.(1919)
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA

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