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Fascicolo 16. Novembre 2023
Storia Militare Contemporanea

a cura di
VIRGLIO ILARI



Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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Distintivo speciale del Dipartimento della Guerra concesso agli addetti al Progetto Manhattan per la Bomba A(Atomica) che hanno lavorato almeno sei mesi tra il 19 giugno 1942 e il 6 agosto 1945

Foto 1198 DOE Ed Westcott 1945 Oak Ridge Tennessee (Wikimedia Commons)

JEREMY BLACK,

A History of Artillery

Lanham (Maryland), Rowman & Littlefield, 2023, pp. 238.



Especially in the Western world, the war in Ukraine has taken us by surprise. Who could have thought even three years ago that Europe would have had a conventional war between two modern countries? The author of this review, an Italian observer, is especially aware of how distant the notion of conventional warfare seemed. In Italy, we do not understand the nature of this war because we do not know how to read it. We have not been interested in war and its nature for a long time. Within this context, one of the things we find most challenging to understand is the role of artillery. How artillery works and what it is today eludes us: even those involved in warfare, i.e. the military, struggle to understand it. Because this weapon, within the Western military context, has long

been neglected. There are various reasons for this. In Italy, it isn't easy to deal with artillery because, in the operations we conducted in the last twenty years, we did not use artillery. We have never taken artillery pieces to Afghanistan, Iraq, or Lebanon. Then, artillery is culturally hostile to the collective imagination that we now have of the armed forces in Italy: it is difficult to explain that artillery is a 'dual use' weapon that can also be used to save people after earthquakes or distribute food to the population.

Within this context, Black's book becomes absolutely relevant and necessary. Black acknowledges what I have just noted, stating from the outset that he will tell the story of a weapon that has been neglected in the last one hundred and ten years. His book is fundamental in helping us understand what artillery is and why it is still highly relevant today.

According to Black, what is the origin of the low regard we have had for artillery in recent years? Firstly, it's a cultural issue, almost symbolic. Airpower and armoured forces held greater symbolic appeal. Secondly, it's related to functions. American doctrine, which aligns with our collective imagination of warfare, does not assign a central role to artillery, somewhat replacing it with airpower. As a result, artillery has lost importance not on the ground but in our imagination. Now, consider the Russians, whom Black discusses well. The Russians have maintained a high regard for artillery because their culture, geographic position, and other factors have shaped a doctrine that values this weapon more than airpower. That's why it matters greatly to them.

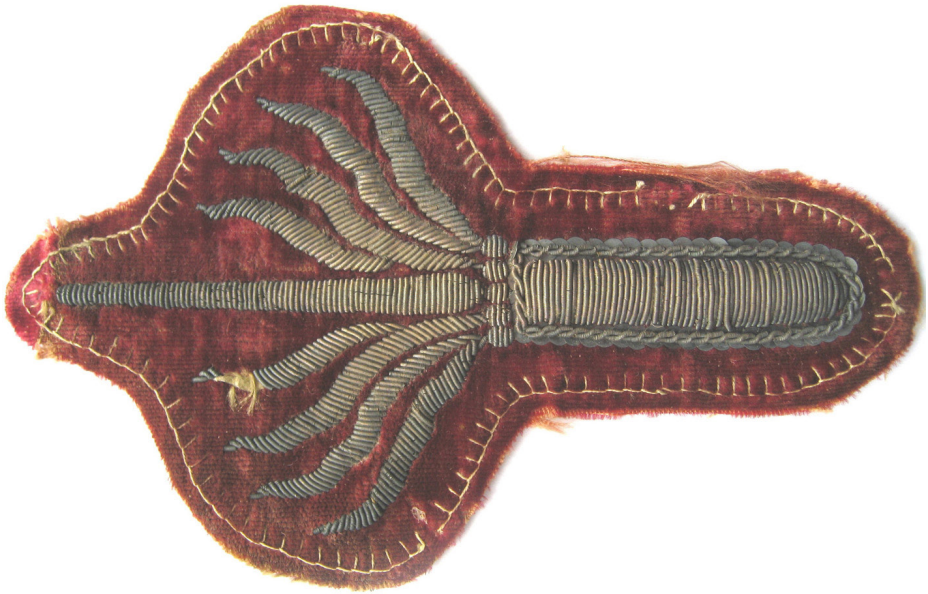
Black's book, though, is not a history of how artillery was neglected. Nor is it a history of the technical evolution of artillery. Black is a military historian with a profound knowledge of warfare, as evidenced by his long list of books on the subject. His is a story of the importance of artillery. An importance that Black is careful to describe as 'relative'. As an excellent military historian, he knows that there are no silver bullets in military history. His book is an in-depth analysis of how artillery was used and had effects within a system composed of different weapons and influenced by various factors. The history of the use of artillery is the history of how this arm has combined with others to be effective in combat. In this sense, the book resembles several other books that the author has devoted to analysing the evolution of individual weapons, such as the recent *History of Tank Warfare*, which I reviewed in NAM. They are all stories of the relative im-

portance of these weapons. Black's in-depth knowledge of military history allows him to assess the contributions made by these weapons to the conduct of warfare in various countries and multiple contexts; he also considers how these contexts influenced the use of these weapons. In short, Black always tells a history of war, but with a perspective that places the centre of gravity of the analysis on artillery.

And this idea is reflected in the book's structure. The book is not organised around the technical evolution of artillery. This would imply categorisation by domain (land, sea, air) and technological advancements. Instead, Black favours a division that, as he explains, effectively highlights the influence of cultural changes on artillery. In each section, Black effectively demonstrates that artillery has always played a significant role based on the 'needs' for this weapon, a demand that, in turn, stemmed from factors including doctrine, culture, and geography. Take, for example, the First World War, which Black defines as "The Artillery War." In reality, outside of Europe, artillery did not determine the outcome of battles.

What is the origin of our low regard for artillery in recent years? Firstly, it's a cultural issue, almost symbolic. Airpower and armoured forces held greater symbolic appeal. Secondly, it's related to functions. American doctrine, which aligns with our collective imagination of warfare, does not assign a central role to artillery, somewhat replacing it with airpower. As a result, artillery has lost importance not on the ground but in our imagination. Now, consider the Russians, whom Black discusses well. The Russians have maintained a high regard for artillery because their culture, geographic position, and other factors have shaped a doctrine that values this weapon more than airpower. That's why it matters greatly to them.

The book is abundant with details that only a historian like Black can provide. It comes highly recommended for a broad readership, particularly for officers of all ranks and branches. It is also replete with significant insights that extend beyond the history of artillery, making it an exceptionally engaging read for any reader.



S.F. Cremer, Sept. 1870: "Embroidered Rocket from the Collar of my father's coat when in Command of the "Rocket Brigade" in Portugal, 1832"

Lee Brandon-Cremer, 2 July 2011, CC SA 3.0 (Wikimedia Commons)



Lev Nikolaevič Tolstoj in uniforme di capitano d'artiglieria

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