

War in History

History 641-02 / Fall 2025

Is war an inherent feature of human life, or is it always exceptional? Is it the ever-present, inherently violent foundation of all societies, or an absurdly destructive aberration from the norm of peaceful coexistence? Although historians do not typically address such philosophical (or anthropological) problems in their work, they do nevertheless operate from implicit assumptions about the relationship between war and peace.

In recent decades, some historians have dismissed “military history” as a niche interest, marginal to the longer-term concerns of social and cultural history. This course makes a claim for war as a central feature of human history – for good or (mostly) for ill. There are no explicit boundaries in chronology or geography. The bulk of the assigned reading will concern the modern era (ca. 1500 - present) and address European or North American powers – whether in inter-state conflict or as colonizers. However, students are invited to prepare historiographic essays related to their specific areas of historical interest, working in consultation with their primary advisors.

Our overall goal in this course is to think in broad terms about how historiography works – that is, how professional historians respond to new ways of thinking and reframe their investigations accordingly. Along the way, we will explore the many ways that war – expanding beyond “military history” narrowly defined – played a formative role in modern societies.

Course Requirements and Policies

As in any graduate course, regular attendance and participation is expected as a matter of course. Students are allowed one pre-arranged absence for the semester. In case of illness, please contact me as soon as you become aware of your condition.

The course grade will be calculated as follows:

- class participation – 40%
- synopses (see below) – 10%
- historiographic essay: initial bibliography – 10%
- historiographic essay: rough draft – 20%
- historiographic essay: final paper – 20%

Students are responsible for seeking regular consultation concerning the historiographic essay. My office hours in BRNG 6152 will run on Mondays & Wednesdays from 1:30 pm – 2:30 pm, though I am happy to make other appointments at your request. It’s easiest to catch me via e-mail at <wggray@purdue.edu>.

A separate handout will discuss the specific expectations for the historiographic essay, but please note that the target length will be at least 15 double-spaced pages (not counting the bibliography).

Class Sessions

Each class session will feature a combination of common reading and book presentations. You will not need to digest every last word of the common reading, but you should come prepared to discuss the key arguments of each of the articles, books, or book chapters assigned. In order to stimulate

discussion and give me some initial impressions of how you responded to the readings, you will be expected to submit two discussion questions by noon on the day of seminar. I'll compile, edit, and distribute these questions, which will help to shape the in-class conversation.

Four times this semester, you will also be expected to present a book to the class – offering an analysis of the book's argument, methodology, sources used, and historiographic contribution. Please submit a two-page synopsis of the book in advance of seminar so that I'll have time to print and distribute them during class. In this way, over the course of the semester each course participant will collect a file with several dozen synopses of books relating to war and society – which may come in handy for some future examination field. (Please note that the synopses are less formal than a book review and are expected to only involve a few hours of engagement with the books. Further guidelines regarding the synopses will be conveyed in a separate handout.)

Course Outline

August 28: Introduction

September 4: War Fighting

- a) Combat histories
- b) Soldiers at war
- c) Wars encapsulated

September 11: War and Strategy

- a) Strategic thought
- b) Grand Strategy

September 18: Material Circumstances

- a) Financing war
- b) Business at war
- c) War and logistics

No class on Sept. 25 – mandatory office meetings Sept. 22-24 instead

October 2: The Wounded and the Captured

- a) War and medicine
- b) Prisoners of war

October 9: Technology and War

- a) New weapons
- b) Military intelligence

October 16: Propaganda Wars

- a) Information/disinformation
- b) Mobilizing the homeland

[October 20: initial bibliography due]

October 23: Gendering war
a) Women at War
b) Masculinity and War

October 30: War and Civilians
a) The home front
b) Refugees
c) Genocide

November 6: Colonial Warfare
a) Colonial conquests
b) Insurgencies and wars of liberation

November 13: Race and War
a) Inclusion and exclusion
b) Race, hate, and violence

November 20: War and Memory
a) Monuments and commemorations
b) Learning and “legacies”

[Rough drafts due Dec 1]

December 4: Check-in session re historiographic essays

[Final drafts due December 12]