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N. 6
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Fascicolo 24. Novembre 2025
Storia Militare Contemporanea (6)



Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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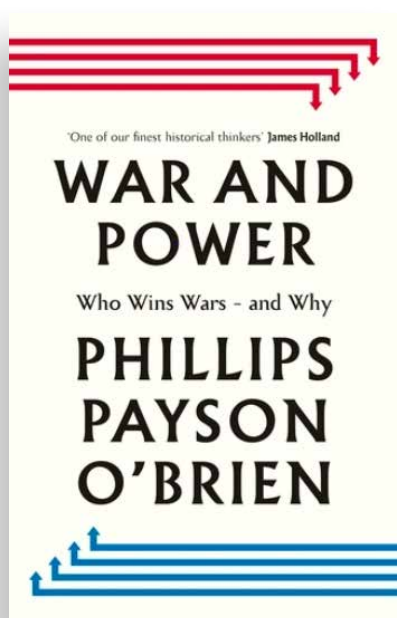
Estandart Reyau d'a Cheneralísma, prencipal bandera carlista d'a primera guerra bordada por María Francisca de Braganza em 1833 Royal Standard of the General in Chief, main Carlist flag of the First War embroidered by Maria Francisca de Braganza in 1833). Wikimedia Commons

PHILLIPS PAYSON O'BRIEN,

War and Power.

Who Wins Wars – and Why'

Penguin Viking, 2025, £22



With the subtitle ‘Who Wins Wars – and Why’, this is not a book lacking in self-assurance, which is one way to confront the challenge of the topic, not least if you wish to range across the world and over the last 150 years. In part O’Brien offers what was called, when I was young, ‘bleedingly obvious’, notably in terms of the nature of war between states, and the need to emphasise ‘the human element of war’. But then, that possibly is the problem with reviewers. They think that books are written for those of their expertise and understanding. Well, not this book, which is clearly written with a different readership in mind, and is full of such insights as ‘Armies have always

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needed supplies, usually lots of them’ or ‘leadership can determine how wars are started – and it makes massive differences in how they are fought’.

The style is certainly clear, as in ‘It was a stupid idea’, and ‘Modern war in its most basic form is a struggle between sides to destroy equipment and kill soldiers on the other side ... using ammunition to destroy enemy targets is fundamental to warfare...’ but this process contributes to repeated judgments that are questionable at best and wrong all-too-frequently. Take the latter two quotes, we must forget clearly about war as a means to gain, wield and use power. The focus, instead, in this book is on a certain type of fighting which is then employed in order to provide the context for firing-from-the-hip judgments. There are glib statements as in ‘Very rarely have the opening battles of a war decided its outcome’, which is the case for some conflicts and means of fighting and relates to his determination to focus on war not battles as in ‘Battles don’t cause the war to end a certain way; they reveal how a war is developing’. This approach is problematic and certainly far less valid when the number of units is far more limited, which is classically the case with naval power. Opening battles can also be crucial in preventing rebellions from developing impetus or, conversely, enabling them to do so, but O’Brien appears to find insurgency and counter-insurgency warfare of only limited interest, while his study of conflict has very little to say about much of the world, including India, Latin America and Africa. Fine you might say, as he is focusing on major wars between great powers, but possibly an author who writes of ‘the dangers of Great Power Thinking’ should practice what he preaches and not define warfare according to the criteria of what he thinks worthy of attention.

JEREMY BLACK



William Balfour Ker (1877-1918), *Knights of Columbus*, 1917 / Poster showing a priest looking heavenward and raising a crucifix, blessing kneeling soldiers. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. Reproduction Number: LC-USZC4-10131
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