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N. 6
2025

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

Italy within the International Commission of Military History, the Past and the Path Ahead

BY DAVIDE BORSANI



The International Commission of Military History (ICMH) has traditionally acted as the primary body for coordinating and promoting scholarly research in military history at a global level. Founded in 1938 as one of the external commissions of the International Committee of Historical Sciences (ICHS), the ICMH – which became an independent organization in 1973 while maintaining affiliation with the ICHS¹ – today represents a consolidated reality that brings together over 40 national commissions from five continents, constituting a fundamental bridge between civilian and military scholars worldwide. It would be misleading to consider the ICMH simply as a bureaucratic organization; it is a living community of people united by the conviction that understanding

1 D. Kostewicz, A 'Clearing House' for Military Historians: *The International Commission of Military History from 1938 until today*, in E. A. Schmidl (ed.), *75 Years. International Commission of Military History*, "International Review of Military History", no. 91 (2013), pp. 83-138.

military history means understanding fundamental aspects of human experience².

Italy has consistently held a position of particular importance within this organization. It is represented by the Italian Commission of Military History (CISM), with its responsibilities being assumed by the Historical Office of the Defence General Staff in 2013. The 1990s marked a key period. At the time, collaboration between the CISM and the Italian Society of Military History (SISM) contributed to create an integrated framework of research and dissemination, which yielded substantial scholarly outcomes and increased the Italian role in the organization. Overall, this process has progressively contributed to positioning Italy in leading roles within the governance of the ICMH and, by reflection, within the broader discipline³. Moreover, as will be shown shortly, Italy has been particularly central to the ICMH over the past 15 years.

The role of a country, not just that of individuals, matters. Unlike other scholarly associations, the ICMH traditionally prioritizes national over individual memberships (though the latter are admitted through an Affiliate Scholarship Program⁴). The organization thus structures itself to acknowledge the national dimensions of military historiography, still shaped by individual perspectives, while fostering a comparative approach to research⁵. This approach has created a unique network where different historiographical traditions confront and mutually enrich each other. The ICMH operates through three pillars that have consolidated over time: annual international congresses, which represent the culminating moment of its scholarly activity; the functioning of specialized committees dedicated to bibliography, archives and education; and editorial production, which ensures the dissemination of research⁶.

The annual congresses – in 2025, in their 50th edition – represent much more than simple academic conferences. They are events that temporarily transform a

2 H. Raugh, *Reflections on Success and the Way Ahead*, in “ICMH Newsletter”, no. 40, December 2023, pp. 4-7.

3 V. Ilari, Quarant’anni di storia militare. Introduzione alla storia della SISM (1984-2024), 2024, pp. 3-18.

4 Affiliate Individual Scholars, ICMH Website, <https://www.icmh-cihm.org/en/who-we-are/affiliate-individual-scholars>.

5 It was no coincidence that the original name of the ICMH was the *Commission Internationale d’Histoire Comparée*. Over the years, however, the adjective *Comparée* was dropped.

6 International Commission of Military History Website, <https://www.icmh-cihm.org>.

city into a crossroads of international historical research, where professional relationships and personal friendships intertwine. During the Cold War, these meetings had particular significance, constituting one of the few *fora* where scholars from the East and the West could engage each other, and demonstrating how military history can serve as a common language for overcoming ideological divisions. The themes addressed during congresses range from major global strategic questions to more specialized regional studies, always maintaining a delicate balance between academic rigor and relevance for understanding contemporary issues⁷.

The three specialized committees constitute the beating heart of the ICMH scholarly activities. The Bibliographical Committee and its members not only review books but also identify trends and developments in global research, regularly publishing contributions on these topics while supervising the *International Journal of Military History and Historiography* (IJMH) and, previously, the *International Bibliography of Military History* (IBMH). The Archives Committee – currently chaired by Carabinieri Lieutenant Colonel Flavio Carbone, who has been re-elected as its President in 2025 – has recently promoted the creation of the *Military Archives Guide*, a database that serves as a treasure map for researchers worldwide, facilitating access to national primary sources that might otherwise remain concealed. The Archives Committee also publishes very valuable contents on its scholarly blog and, previously, on its *Mars & Janus* newsletter⁸. The Educational Committee, on which Professor Gianluca Pastori from Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore is a member, focuses on discussing teaching methods and training new generations through initiatives ranging from conference panels for doctoral students to the prestigious André Corvisier Prize, established in 2017 to award the best doctoral theses in military history, the ICMH Fellowship for Research Projects, inaugurated in 2021, and the IJMH Early Career Prize.

The ICMH editorial activity shows the story of the organization through its publications. The *International Review of Military History*, with its 92 issues published since 1939, constitutes an impressive testimony to the organization's scholarly continuity. The *Review/Revue* endured the Second World War, international crises and epochal geopolitical transformations without ever interrupting

7 M. de Leonardis, *L'importanza della storia militare. Il ruolo della International Commission of Military History*, "Rivista Marittima", maggio 2020, pp. 94-101.

8 The Committee of Military Archives (CAM) Blog, <https://cam.hypotheses.org/>.



The ICMH *Newsletter*, which is published twice yearly, and the *Military History Conference Listing* complete the editorial production of the organization.

its mission of dissemination and research. The IJMH – today printed by the renowned publishing house Brill and distributed from 1978 to 2015 as the IBMH – represents the evolution toward increasingly high academic standards, transforming from a valuable bibliographical review into a leading scholarly journal that hosts contributions from the most illustrious international military historians⁹.

Italy's growing importance within the ICMH is evident both in its origins – when Italian was recognized as one of the organization's five official languages (together with English, French, German, and Spanish) – and in more recent developments, notably the election of Professor Massimo de Leonardis (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore) as President in

2015 and his re-election in 2020, which enabled him to serve an entire decade (2015-2025). This double mandate, which came after five years as Vice-President (2010-2015), constituted not only a well-deserved personal distinction but also the culmination of a process through which Italy gradually consolidated its presence and influence in the field of military history. During his tenure, de Leonardis was able to combine the organization's tradition with innovations necessary to face 21st century challenges, promoting initiatives such as the aforementioned André Corvisier Prize and the ICMH Fellowship for Research Projects, and consolidating the ICMH standing at the International Congresses of Historical Sciences¹⁰. In 2022, de Leonardis led the ICMH delegation to the ICHS Congress

⁹ Professor Nicola Labanca, from Università degli Studi di Siena, is the only Italian scholar in the IJMH Advisory Board. See International Journal of Military History and Historiography Website, <https://www.brill.com/view/journals/ijmh/ijmh-overview.xml>.

¹⁰ de Leonardis' Inaugural Speeches at ICMH Congresses are available at this address:



Three leading Italians in the history of the ICMH: Prof. Raimondo Luraghi (1921-2012), founder of the SISM, 1984) and promoter of the first international ICMH congress in Italy (Turin, 1992). Col. Matteo Paesano, past President of the Italian Commission of Military History (CISM) and organizer of the other two international ICMH congresses in Italy (34th Trieste 2008 and 39th Turin 2013). Prof. Massimo De Leonardis, past President of the ICMH (2015-2025).

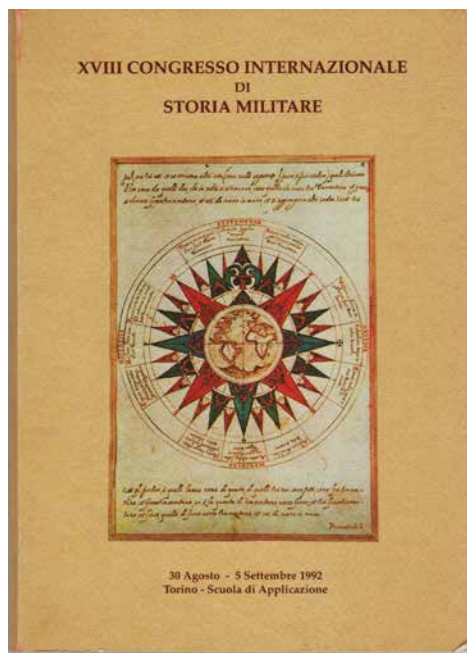
in Poznań, Poland, taking part in the panel *Rearmaments and Disarmaments after the two World Wars in the XX Century* co-organised with the International Commission of the History of International Relations. The ICMH delegation was completed by the Austrian Brigadier General Mario Christian Ortner, the Swiss scholar Marcel Berni and the present author¹¹.

Moreover, Italy has demonstrated its organizational capacity by hosting three ICMH congresses on its soil in the last 35 years. The first was the XVIII Congress of Turin in 1992 on the theme *The Discovery of the New World and its Influence on Military History*, which represented Italy's debut as a host country. The Congress was much more than an academic event: it represented the maturity of Italian military history studies and their affirmation in the international panorama. The event required a complex coordination operation that involved institutions, universities and associations in a common effort that demonstrated the potential of the Italian system when it manages to operate in an integrated and cooperative way¹².

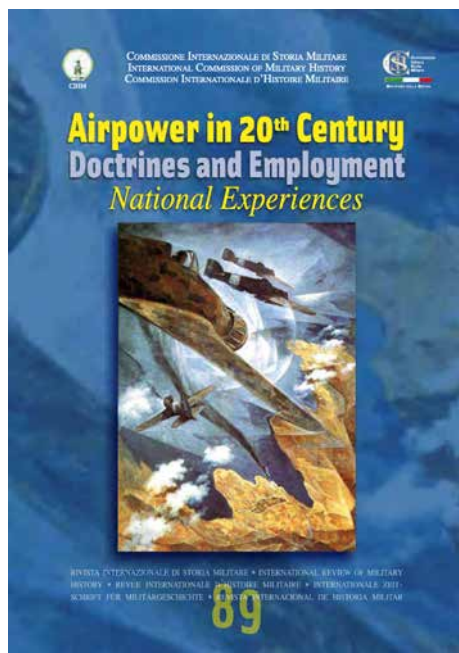
https://www.icmh-cihm.org/en/what-we-do/publications/texts/7/view,containers/sort_order,0/lang,en-gb/.

11 The full texts of presentations, with the exception of Berni's, have been published in "Quaderni di Scienze Politiche", no. 23 (2023), pp. 77-128.

12 Ilari, *Quarant'anni*, cit., pp. 12-13. Of the 170 participants, 54 were Italian.



The XXXIV Congress of Trieste in 2008 confirmed Italian organizational excellence and the scholarly maturity reached by the national community. Held under the supervision of Army Colonel Matteo Paezano, the Congress addressed the theme *Military Conflicts and Civil Populations. Total Wars, Limited Wars, Asymmetrical Wars*. The choice of Trieste as the venue was not casual: the city, with its complex border history and its ties to World Wars and early Cold War, offered an ideal context for reflecting on the relationships between military and civilian dimensions in modern conflicts.



The XXXIX Congress of Turin in 2013 represented a further moment of prestige for Italy, confirming the old capital of the Kingdom of Italy as a privileged venue for events of international relevance. The Congress had as its theme *Joint and Multinational Operations in Military History*, a topic of great relevance then as now that reflected not only a historiographical consolidated trend, but also the operational needs of the contemporary world. The event was held under the High Patronage of the President of the Italian Republic and benefited from the support of numerous Italian universities, including Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, “La Sapienza” University of Rome, the University of Naples “Federico II”, the University of Turin, the University of Siena and the University of Eastern Piedmont¹³.

¹³ The Acta of the Congresses held in Trieste and Turin are available at this ad-

The Italian contribution to ICMH editorial activities recently found a significant expression in volume 89 of the *International Review of Military History* dedicated to *Air Power in the 20th Century*¹⁴. This project represented a recognition of the Italian contribution in the field of military aviation. Italy was indeed the first country in the world to use airplanes in war during the Italo-Turkish conflict for the conquest of Libya in 1911, and Giulio Douhet was the first theorist to understand and systematize the crucial strategic role that air power would play in future wars. Not by chance, Colonel Paesano emphasized in the introduction to the *Review* that it was “quite obvious for the International Commission of Military History (ICMH) to task the Italian Commission of Military History (CISM) with publishing a monographic issue of its *Review* completely devoted to air power in the XX century”. The project benefited from the prompt and enthusiastic participation of other national commissions and from collaboration with the Historical Office of the Italian Air Force, which curated the editing of the work under the scholarly supervision of de Leonardis. The volume presented a particular cover: the reproduction of the painting by Alfredo Gauro Ambrosi “War in the Sky” from 1942, kept in the Aviation Museum “Gianni Caproni” of Trento, symbol of Italian aeronautical tradition¹⁵.

Certainly, the CISM has represented a peculiar model of integration between academic research and state institutions, encompassing both civilian and military personnel. Its formal structuring in 1986 by the will of the then-Defence Minister Giovanni Spadolini – not coincidentally a historian by profession – reflected an enlightened conception of the relationship between the academic world and ministerial institutions. The transfer of responsibilities from the CISM to the Historical Office of the Defence General Staff in 2013 allowed the civil-military cooperative model to survive. This ensured Italy’s continued influential presence in the ICMH while providing essential support to its delegation members. This model, which Italy shares with countries like Germany, Greece, and Spain, undoubtedly presents advantages but also raises potential, delicate questions about the relationship between research autonomy and institutional control. Howev-

dress: <https://www.icmh-cihm.org/en/what-we-do/publications/acta>.

14 Italy edited three issues of the *Review*: in 1951, 1978 and 2011.

15 Commissione Italiana di Storia Militare (CISM), *Airpower in 20th Century. Doctrines and Employment, National Experiences*, “International Review of Military History”, no. 89 (2011).

er, the positive Italian experience demonstrates that it is possible to maintain a fruitful balance, provided that respect for the principles of scholarly inquiry and freedom of research is guaranteed.

The CISM and, by extension, the Historical Office of the Defence General Staff are not the only Italian bodies that aim at promoting military history. Although this is not the place for a full examination of the various actors, one can say that the SISM has represented the most important civilian associative component of the Italian community over the last four decades. Founded in 1984, the SISM has recently experienced significant growth under the leadership of Professor Virgilio Ilari, who assumed the presidency in 2004 with the ambitious goal of an internationally-oriented and ethical refoundation of military history studies in Italy. Ilari has transformed what was initially a restricted group of renowned scholars – among the earliest, Professors Raimondo Luraghi and Antonello Biagini, from LUISS and University of Genoa, and “La Sapienza” University of Rome, respectively – into one of the most dynamic Italian scholarly associations in the historical field, reaching over 500 members and establishing itself as a reference point for all those interested in military history¹⁶.

The multifaceted composition of the SISM, which today brings together academics, military personnel, independent scholars and simple enthusiasts, creates a particularly fertile interdisciplinary environment. This diversity represents both an asset and a challenge, requiring constant balance between scholarly rigor and broad accessibility. The launch of the journal *Nuova Antologia Militare* (NAM) in 2020 marked a quality leap, transforming the SISM into a leading actor in the national and international academic editorial panorama, as demonstrated by the rich English-language production and its prestigious international advisory board.

Along this journey, numerous individuals have contributed with distinction and rigor to Italy’s progress. The already-mentioned personality of Professor Luraghi emerges among the main architects of Italy’s entry into the international circuit of military history studies, including the ICMH¹⁷. Luraghi was not only a

16 Among the other promoting bodies, it is worth mentioning that two years before the foundation of the SISM, in 1982, Professors Piero Del Negro and Giorgio Rochat created the Inter-University Centre for Historical and Military Studies, which is still active today and chaired by Professor Labanca.

17 See *American Legacy. La SISM ricorda Raimondo Luraghi*, “Quaderni SISM”, 2013, in particular pp. 9-32.

scholar of exceptional competence and the first President of the SISM, but also a man endowed with strategic vision that allowed him to understand the importance of international networks for the development of national studies. His election to the ICMH Full Board during the XVI Congress of Madrid in 1990 represented a turning point, the result of years of patient construction of relationships and international scholarly recognition. The support of André Corvisier, the great French historian and ICMH President between 1980 and 1990, was decisive for Luraghi's election. This episode perfectly illustrates how in international environments not only academic competence counts – which remains a *conditio sine qua non* – but also the ability to build relationships of trust and mutual esteem. Corvisier recognized in Luraghi an interlocutor of excellence, capable of bringing innovative perspectives to military history studies¹⁸. After Luraghi completed his two terms as a member of the ICMH Full Board, he was succeeded by Piero Del Negro from the University of Padua (2000-2010).

However, despite such prestigious international recognition, it would be illusory to think that the discipline of military history within the Italian system was, and still is, free from structural problems that limit its full potential. Among the major long-standing criticalities, certainly there is the position of military history in the university system. The absence of an autonomous scholarly-disciplinary sector and its subordination to other “histories” create significant obstacles for the discipline's development, first of all in the epistemological field¹⁹. Indeed, the phenomenon of war extends across multiple domains and resists being confined within the boundaries of a single academic already-established sector. One may think, for instance, of strategic history, a field where economic, social, political, and technological forces (among others) converge, reflecting its intrinsically multifaceted and historically dynamic character. This situation contrasts significantly with the realities of some European academic excellences, such as the King's College in London, United Kingdom, where dedicated structures exist, with hundreds of specialized researchers sharing the common aim of understanding war as a complex and evolving puzzle.

Furthermore, limited access to military archives, especially for the post-Sec-

18 Ilari, *Quarant'anni*, cit., p. 12

19 Id., *Per un'epistemologia della storia militare*, in “Nuova Antologia Militare”, no. 1 (2020), pp. 27-78.



Colonel Harold Raugh, President of the ICMH

ond World War period, represents another weakness of Italy's system. While other Western countries have progressively liberalized access to their archives, Italy still maintains procedures and limitations that hinder innovative research. This situation not only damages Italian scholars but also compromises the country's attractiveness for international researchers.

What, then, lies ahead for the ICMH and for Italy's role within the organization? With the L ICMH Congress held in September 2025 in Dakar, Senegal, a new President has been elected for the quinquennium 2025-2030. This is Dr. Harold Raugh, former ICMH Vice-President, renowned historian and member of NAM's scientific editorial board. His arrival opens new scenarios for the organization and for the role that Italy can play, or better will be continuing to play. Raugh, with his vast experience in the field of military history and his pragmatic vision, has outlined an ambitious strategy that aims to reform and update the organization while maintaining the progresses of the previous administration, first

of all from the point of view of scholarly evolution²⁰.

As declared in his Strategic Vision, Raugh's mandate will be articulated, touching all aspects of the organization's activity. The main objective remains that of continuing to promote, encourage and coordinate research results and studies, as well as publication and education on a global basis. Particular emphasis is placed on collaboration between academic historians and researchers from the Ministries of Defence, and between civilian and military personnel, on sharing best practices and on developing common capacities and competencies. The will to continue emphasizing the Corvisier Prize for doctoral theses, ICMH Fellowship Research scholarships, the IJMH Early Career Prize and workshops for doctoral students during congresses demonstrates particular attention toward new generations of scholars. After all, these programs represent strategic investments in the discipline and ICMH future, and testify the awareness that the organization's sustainability depends on the ability to attract and involve young talents. Thus, another priority is modernization of ICMH communication, including the website and creation of social media platforms, which respond to an essential necessity in the digital age. The organization must be able to communicate effectively with different audiences, from specialized researchers to the general public interested in military history, in an appealing and solid manner.

In this context, marked by both continuity and renewal, the recent appointment of the present author as ICMH Vice-President primarily represents a recognition of the role that Italy has played, and intends to continue playing, at the international level within the organization. Yet, as significant as individual agency may be in the sphere of the human sciences (and in daily life), it remains but one element within a far more complex mosaic for those who aspire to give the discipline an authentic international dimension. The challenges awaiting Italy in the field of military history, in fact, begin at home. They call for a continuous coordinated effort between civilian and military institutions, academia, and the broader institutional world – an effort capable of translating into concrete initiatives that enhance each actor's specific contribution for the benefit of the entire community, including the wider public. Among the long-standing yet still pressing priorities

20 H. Raugh, *A message from the President*, September 2025, available on ICMH Website: <https://www.icmh-cihm.org/en/176-message-from-president>. Raugh's Strategic Vision for 2025-2030 is available to be downloaded at the same address.

are the promotion of joint editorial ventures, the creation of opportunities for young researchers, and the modernization of access to military archives – not to mention the never-ending struggle for full academic recognition.



ICMH STRATEGIC VISION, 2025-2030

- Dr. Raugh will serve one 5-year term & facilitate leadership transition to younger team
- Continue to foster, promote, & coordinate:
 - Research results & studies in the field of military history
 - Research, publication, & education on a global basis
 - Collaboration between civilian & MOD military historians
 - Sharing of best historical practices & development of partner military history capacity and capability
- Continue to emphasize:
 - Corvisier Prize for PhD Theses on Military History
 - ICMH Fellowship for Research Projects on Military History
 - IJMH Early Career Paper Prize
 - Ph.D. Candidates' Workshops at Congresses
- Plan & execute annual world-class congresses/conferences
- Enhance transparency
- Attract & groom younger historians for leadership positions
- Establish Council of Commission Presidents to meet each year to assess effectiveness of programs & improve as appropriate
- Establish ICMH Partnership Program & develop promotional materials to encourage organization of new commissions with, for example, Ibero-American nations
- Modernize ICMH website & social media platforms
- Explore sponsorship & other funding opportunities
- Assess plans & projects of specialized committees, & increase support when appropriate to increase effectiveness
- Encourage increased participation in specialized committees
- Establish ad hoc committee to review Statutes & recommend revisions & updates
- Revitalize publication of the *International Review of Military History*
- Update 1938-2013 ICMH history

26 September 2025

Website: www.icmh-cihm.org/en/who-we-are/history

Email address: e.paschalidou@hndgs.mil.gr



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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