

# Psychology, History and War: two examples of academic discourses that fail to oppose war and militarism

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**SUMMARY:** This article examines two important academic contributions on the subject of war: the 2018 BBC Reith Lecture series given by historian Margaret MacMillan, and psychologist Steven Pinker's 2012 book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: a history of violence*. It is suggested that each can be seen as offering justifications for continued support for militarism, or at least for withholding unconditional support for anti-militarism.

**KEY WORDS:** war, militarism, academic neutrality, psychology

In the 2018 Reith Lectures, broadcast on BBC radio between 30<sup>th</sup> June and 28<sup>th</sup> July, Margaret MacMillan, professor of History at Oxford University, considered the subject of war and humanity. This annual lecture series is important, commemorating as it does the foundation of the BBC. For some people, like the BBC itself, the Reith Lectures are a much admired and valued feature of British life. Of the five lectures that made up the 2018 series, the first two were held in London, but the third and fourth respectively in Beirut and Belfast, both places that have experienced organised armed conflict in recent times. The fifth was held in Canada, Professor MacMillan's home country, at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa.

What she had to say was full of insights into the nature of war and our attitudes towards it, but overall the lectures troubled me. They put me in mind of another, now famous source of ideas on the subject, US psychologist Steven Pinker's (2012)

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