

INTER-CULTURAL EXPERTISE: SOLDIERS AND HISTORIANS

DONALD ABENHEIM

NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

INTRODUCTION: STRATEGY IS OUT, ANTHROPOLOGY IS IN

The historian should be a partner to the soldier in the attempt better to understand culture as a feature of present-day military service. To do so, however, such historians must also be experts in the culture of soldiers — a different kind of inter-cultural expertise that must underlie any serious effort to bring the nuances of cultural study and understanding to the practice of soldiering. The study of the past faces notable limits in the higher aspects of security, defense and war that inhere in the culture of soldiers as well as the regard (or rather disregard) for the past in our post-modern society, especially in the United States. These professional limits and the challenges to what one might call an understanding of inter-cultural expertise at the strategic level form the subjects for the next forty minutes. (The question at hand also has implications for democratic civil military relations, a subject that remains at the heart of these seminars, now in their tenth year — something historical in its own right. Might I also add that what follows is a distillate of my own more than thirty years' experience in this matter as an historian in university think-tanks and the US government.)

OVERVIEW

The present talk offers: a.) a brief introduction to the role of historical study in inter-cultural expertise in the record of the US and German armed forces; b.) a reflection on the historian's calling and the habits of the mind and character that strike me as central to expertise about one's own culture and the cultures of others; c.) a warning of the danger that arises when, as now, the history of war is falsely conceived and, thus deformed, becomes a weapon in what in the United States are called "cultural wars." The ensuing polarization of US domestic politics obscures and eschews inter-cultural expertise, to say nothing of the harm it does to the effective making of strategy more generally. In other words, the loudest tones in the current debate disserve all varieties of inter-cultural expertise.

TWO BAD EXAMPLES

At the outset, I offer two polemical examples of the limits of history and inter-cultural expertise in the form of two contemporary US figures who make generalizations about the military past of central Europe and the connections of this past to the present. These tendentious

pronouncements betray to me, at least, a deficient degree of inter-cultural expertise. The first is contained in a 25 October 2007 opinion article in the New York Times — also in the IHT — by Roger Cohen. He pits the existing burden-sharing calls in NATO from the Dutch, British and Australians against the so-called national caveats and limitations for ISAF (well known to an audience of this kind...) and especially for a greater German (and French and Spanish) combat role against the Taliban in the southeast of Afghanistan, and he comes up with a peculiar wish:

Remember the Wehrmacht? It was a formidable fighting force. The modern German Army, the Bundeswehr is also very effective. Thing is, it is reluctant to fight or even to place itself in danger. Given history, that may seem just fine. The US helped to frame the institutions of today's Germany precisely to guarantee peace over war. But in AFG, where 3200 German troops serve in a hard pressed NATO force, a touch of "Bundesmacht" would be welcome. NYT, 25 October 2007, p. A 27

A similar flourish of inadequate inter-cultural expertise about the past comes from movie-land. Since the summer of this year, one has the strange case of Tom Cruise's discovery of Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg. Such is part of the general recent Hollywood romance with the new Berlin, but also what I believe in my own experience to have been a deliberate attempt by Scientologists to target the German armed forces for ideological reasons. The German MOD initially turned down this man's request (rightfully, I might add) to film in the former HQ of the Ersatzheer, in the Bendlerblock, next to the present-day German MOD. Here popular culture of a kind collides with the central European culture of soldiers to form a gross disservice to the serious business of soldiering versus the Tinseltown make-believe version of the soldier in the Third Reich joined with the Agit-prop of L. Ron Hubbard's kook army (with its rather different uniforms).

These examples call into question whether leading figures in US elite political culture (i.e. opinion editors of the New York Times) or US popular culture are fundamentally capable of a serious appreciation of the history of central Europe, its culture or more properly its political and strategic cultures. This question is germane to the matter of the cultures of the Middle East and Southwest Asia, for if my charges (student-officers who must embody and advance the U.S. military's intellectual and scholarly aspect) are incapable of understanding the politics, society, and culture of Europe, then the prospects for the more immediately urgent assignments are doubly problematic. In this connection, I do not want to fall into the trap of expatriate snobbery

on foreign territory, in that I mock my ill-informed countrymen in front of you. Such a thing is too facile, and does nothing to resolve the festering problem. On the contrary, I appeal to the high standards given to me by my European teachers in my long struggle to understand the role of culture in politics in modern times and the culture of soldiers — that is, in my own attempt to become an inter-cultural expert.

THE US EXPERIENCE IN SHORT, 1940 UNTIL NOW

For this veteran historian in public service and military educator, the post-2004 call for inter-cultural expertise in military operations also can provoke a shrug of exhaustion amid the protracted campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the persistence of inter-cultural in-expertise continues to complicate the discourse and, thus, the prospects for sustainable resolutions . This fatigue becomes even more profound when one considers the record since the 1950s as concerns the role of the sciences, the humanities and the arts in the higher aspects of war, the making of strategy and the soldierly profession in the United States. From the eclipse, in the first atomic clouds of the 1940s, of such traditional figures in the cultural pantheon of soldiers as Henri de Jomini, Alfred Thayer Mahan and Billy Mitchell, to the rise of the military manager as business-school graduate and the nuclear scientist and the systems analyst as arbiters of war and peace, the mid-century strategic debate sought to replace the archaic notions of soldiering before The Bomb with newer ideas more suited to a strategic environment that had to be without precedent, granted the pure mega-tonnage at stake. That is, war could wrongly be said to be a union of physics, management theory and economics. This triumvirate predominated until the late 1960s, when the advent of Mao's protracted war unsettled the whole arrangement. The discomfiture of the military manager/defense manger and economist in the Vietnam debacle then saw the revival of the historian as partner to the strategist in the return of strategic idealism in the mid-1970s, evident in the reform of curriculum in the US Naval War College with the addition of the humanities, as well as in the so-called Clausewitz renaissance associated with the re-invention of doctrine (FM 100-5) in the US Army of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

DEAD END OF THE REVOLUTION IN MILITARY AFFAIRS AND INTER CULTURAL EXPERTISE

The success in combat in the 1990–91 Gulf War led to an over-optimistic return to the management sciences as the source of all strategic wisdom, though this time, the emphasis fell less on “whiz kids” ca. 1961 than on computer and communications wizardry of our rising digital age. Now, the nuclear strategist found himself consigned to the dustbin of defense-intellectual

fashion, as the so-called revolution in military affairs declared the atom-splitters to be old-fashioned and, worse, wholly irrelevant to strategic situation that only the Nintendo-fluent generations could adequately grasp. A great deal of nonsense based loosely on the past — or a misreading of it — accumulated around this idea until the summer of 2003 when the campaign in Iraq stumbled into the insurgency.

Since then, the failure of this stillborn revolution in the fight against the Jihadists — and the disgrace of the RMA's proponents in the bloody back streets of Baghdad and in the mountains of Afghanistan — has been startling to some, but entirely expected by others more at home in the history of war and in the roles of society and culture in warfare. And now the humanities and social sciences have once again achieved a kind of boom phase. Indeed, one sees the rise of the anthropologist-at-arms as the partner to the counterinsurgency specialist and the nation-builder. This development marks a kind of throwback to the late 19th century as exemplified in the British experience in their empire of the late 19th and early 20th centuries — consider here such British luminaries as T.E. Lawrence and Getrude Bell. I do not wish to reflect on them as a model, per se, because I am a historian of central Europe, not of Edwardian Britain nor of its elites in universities and in the colonial armed forces. From my perspective, the careers of such historical figures exclude them from being a model for you and me or for the men and women we educate. But reflection on their lives in the context of their time might aid us better to understand their circumstances of service, and, as a result, our own, as well. That is, the political, social and intellectual world that produced Lawrence and Bell has little in common with the experience of my US student officers, and hence has limited utility in the 21st century. Such is the case, in part, because the brains of the US forces are oriented toward goals other than an understanding of culture and society in organized violence.

In contrast to the armies of most European nations, the US forces have an enormous historical establishment — or what one might call a historical capability — that has a vast offerings in training, education and defense management somehow connected to the analysis, interpretation, and rendering into the realm of the symbolic of the past, described by others as history. Do look at the websites of the service centers for military history, especially that of the United States Army, the service that plainly has the most well developed program in this area. The overall impression even to me as a veteran of this system is astonishing, especially in comparison, say, with Germany and Austria in terms of size. But the number of personnel as well as the variety of their activities should not be the final determinant of the question before us. Quantity and quality remain two different categories. To what intellectual end within the goals of policy within a democracy does this effort successfully operate, and by what means?

In the US case, those expert in the past are principally engaged in the application or exploitation of the past for the formation of operational doctrine as well as for the maintenance of soldierly tradition, i.e. Sinnestiftung. I call this activity: die Verwertung der Vergangenheit. It entails a didactic application of the past on a huge scale and on a technocratic basis, in which the idea of culture, in a central European sense, has played scarcely any role at all. Consider in this connection the very job description of the US Army Chief of Military History, who “is responsible for ensuring the appropriate use of military history in the teaching of strategy, tactics, logistics, and administration” and whose “mission includes the requirement that military leaders at all levels be aware of the value of history in advancing military profession.” To put the matter another way: the institutional exploitation of the past for didactic purposes — often described as military history and disseminated as the inevitable “lessons learned” — serves the formation of pertinent systems of military doctrine and the cataloging of lessons of war on the operational or tactical levels. This practice has a glorious past that speaks to the culture of soldiers in my country. It also speaks to the limitations of this time-honored approach to the past for inter-cultural expertise. The experts do not even ask the necessary questions of their subject or their material to achieve inter-cultural insights. Inter-cultural inquiry seldom enters into the basic analytical calculus. Cohen’s statement about the Wehrmacht in comparison to the Bundeswehr reflects this phenomenon. The admiration in the anglo-saxon world for the German soldier of the early 20th century inevitably fails to grasp the political and social world of such soldiers, that is, the central European culture of the soldier with which many of you are well familiar.

This problematic heritage stands in contrast to the metaphysics of Carl von Clausewitz and, in my opinion, more reflects the pseudo-scientific approach of Henri de Jomini and his many acolytes as it endures into the present in endless systems of formalistic schemas of war. This peculiar instrumentalization of the past began with the foundation of West Point in 1802 on the basis of a French school of applied military engineering and continued through to the foundation of the US Naval War College in 1890, of the US Army War College in 1901 and of the Industrial College of the US Army in 1924 — all institutions that accord pride of place to applied sciences or subjects that can be dressed as such. The US-sponsored recycling of German general staff officers from the prison camp to NATO’s entryway in the late 1940s was guided by a similar practical concern. The “lessons learned” by Wehrmacht general staff officers were abstracted in American minds from their political and social context and made into universal principles applicable in 1950s NATO, Europe or other fronts in the cold war.

In the 1990s, this process — that is, the construction of ideal types based on so-called lessons from history — took a turn into the extreme amid the “revolution in military affairs,”

originally a Soviet idea popularized by Andrew Marshall, one of the original group at RAND in Santa Monica in the 1950s. The ensuing application of the legacy of railroads and rifles, and of armored vehicles and radios, to contemporary conflict had its origins in the middle and late 1970s. This false dogma of technological progress as the dominant force of warfare represented a wrong-headed attempt to generalize about the role of technology in conflict, while seeking a kind of new paradigm for combat that would have the same persuasiveness as nuclear deterrence doctrine of the 1950s and 1960s. This idea also embodied an attempt to uphold the strategic idealism of the late 19th and early 20th century in the face of rapid political, social and economic change at the end of the 20th century. This dubious ideal then and now embodied a compact, self-referential doctrine of the elite control over machine warfare and later over digitalized combat that sought to canalize or otherwise control the uncontrollable escalatory forces of imperialism, integral nationalism, technology, and racism.

Such an idea and its application in practice also wished away or sought to make only incidental the question of culture and society in warfare, especially the culture and society of likely opponents once the Soviet Union collapsed. The failure of this dogma and its proponents (symbolized by the downfall of Donald Rumsfeld) in the face of irregular warfare as well as the respective traditions of organized violence in Middle Eastern and southwest Asian societies requires a full institutional as well as scholarly interpretation that has yet to unfold. But surely the technocratic system of lessons learned and best practices amid the selective exploitation of the past as an adjunct to management sciences has turned up a great big dud. Such a system is poorly suited to produce inter-culture expertise even if, in the past couple of years, the attempt has begun to remedy this problem amid the counter-insurgency doctrine put forward by General Petraeus while in command of US Army Training and Doctrine Command.

Now, as someone who has been a member of this institution for nearly as long as my august colleague with four stars, I wish to register my doubts about certain fundamental philosophical habits of the mind in this system. The unbending emphasis on the primacy of tactics in union with the technological paradigm make the promotion of inter-cultural expertise more than passingly problematic for many of my students and other officers whom I have encountered in more than thirty years of government service.

THE GERMAN EXPERIENCE AS CONTRAST

Lest my critique above strike you as too negative or defeatist, the example of Oberst i.G. Hans-Meier Welcker, the first chief of the Military History Office (Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt der Bundeswehr) in the year 1957 until 1964, opens a different and more

suggestive perspective as concerns inter-cultural expertise and the culture of soldiers. Whereas Stauffenberg's name may yet become a household word in various locales because of Hollywood, even in the Bundeswehr, Meier-Welcker is scarcely known save to those of us professionally associated with the MGFA or in the educational establishment of the Bundeswehr. Nonetheless, his legacy offers us a way forward to inter-cultural expertise that can contribute to the harmony between democracy and the professional soldier.

Of primary importance to us here is the manner in which Meier-Welcker, a veteran of the Reichswehr and a general staff officer in the Wehrmacht (and a colleague of Stauffenberg), contributed to the eradication of the Nazi abuse of scholarship and to the democratic consolidation of West German democracy in the 1950s and the 1960s by the integration of the German soldier into the spirit and letter of the German Basic Law. He did so in an attempt to answer the question of whether a soldier and historian could learn from history in the wake of the experience of arms and the state from 1918 until 1945. His question formed but part of what presently came to be known as *Innere Führung*, in which civic education forms a significant part of this unifying ideal of constitutional imperatives and enlightened principles of leadership, command and morale.

Innere Führung relies, in part, on *historische Bildung*, a process for which no comparable activity exists in the US forces. *Historische Bildung* forms a component of the *Bildung* of an officer or a soldier amid a life-long process. One seeks to answer the questions of the past and to shatter the vice grip of myths and legends. One does so with an ideologically neutral, scholarly reading of primary sources that adheres to the standards of academic research at the highest level. *Historische Bildung* also keeps in mind that past events unfolded as a consequence of cultural, political, social, economic, technical, legal and religious factors. As a result, the history of conflict, military institutions and soldiers becomes linked to greater historical and contemporary developments in politics, culture, economy and society. Thus *Historische Bildung* represents something very different from a catalog of lessons learned or a gallery of ancestors.

This aspect of the soldier scholar in *Innere Führung* broke abruptly with past custom and tradition. Before 1945, the use of history-at-arms in the Prussian/German experience had been, in the first instance, to provide the dynastic elites with their claim to political and social privileges of the old regime. In the second instance, it furnished the military managerial elite of the late 19th and early 20th centuries with their claim to professional expertise in the art and science of war during the age of the machine and mass politics. To be precise, the interpretation of the history of war in the late 19th century lay in the hands of the Prussian-German general staff, whose emphasis on lessons learned as well as the formation of a compact, self-referential doctrine has been

handed down to the US armed forces of this day. Finally, the history of war, super-charged with the experience of the front fighter as well as integral nationalism and racism, became a means to instill a totalitarian, militarist ethos in the citizens of greater Germany.

After receiving a doctorate at Tübingen in 1952, Meier-Welcker joined Ulrich de Maizière, one of the fathers of Innere Führung, in the Amt Blank in Bonn, the forerunner of the Ministry of Defense. The two had been educated together as general staff officers in 1937–39. Meier-Welcker led the small history section in the Ermekeilkaserne. He became head of the new MGFA in Langenau near Ulm in 1957 and built, in the years until his retirement in 1964, an intellectual bridge to the life of the mind according to the standards of universities in the FRG and beyond.

Meier-Welcker had the following to say about the value of history in the culture of soldiers, and his ideas reveal a path to greater inter-cultural expertise through the study of the past that adheres to high scholarly standards:

Our skepticism as concerns the educational possibilities via the study of history does not concern history itself, but rather concerns ourselves. It may be that history no longer can cause enthusiasm in us, that is, according to Goethe, the best that it can give us. If it can be said to have any value for education, ... then such can only exist when it compels human beings to face themselves; to remind them of their potential and their limits, as well as to show them in their entanglement and dependency, but also to show them in their freedom. Where is such more possible than in the history of war? Surely one must reach the essence of the past events. Das Denken im Ganzen bleibt immer das Gegenstück zum Handeln im einzelnen.

Surely if there exists a single idea before us that speaks to the contribution of the historian to inter-cultural expertise, it is this last sentence, which draws its inspiration for the world of German classicism. The message and meaning here further is wholly alien to the technocratic, lessons learned catalog mindset that characterizes — and limits — historical and inter-cultural understanding today. In my own experience as a promoter of inter-cultural expertise in the US forces, I have found a general institutionalized resistance to conceive of matters in the sense of the whole, in favor of an overemphasis on tactics and technology, all at the expense of inter-cultural expertise.

The accomplishment of Meier-Welcker and the men and women who have followed him in the last half century has been to establish a standard of intellectual excellence in historical research and education in the Bundeswehr in the face of some fairly major obstacles. This approach connects the historian in military service to German professional soldiers; it has also built a path to the scholarly world and facilitated the democratic integration of armed forces in a Europe. Such labor has unfolded with adequate bureaucratic resources and with some controversy, especially about the question of the Wehrmacht in National Socialism with which you are familiar. To be sure, a younger generation of editorial writers and even younger screen idols know far too little of this issue, nor are they likely to learn.

Meier-Welcker is a worthy heir to Hans Delbrueck and to Carl von Clausewitz in the manner in which the intellectual rigor of these men and their sense of the whole are exemplary for inter-cultural expertise in the 21st century. Put another way, if one embraces the best that historical scholarship has to offer as regards the link between war in the past to society, culture, economy, and politics, then one has made a step in the direction of education for inter cultural expertise. Historians who follow Meier-Welcker's example can well be partners of the soldier in the quest for inter-cultural expertise.

CONCLUSION: BEWARE THE TERRIBLE SIMPLIFIERS

The story above points to an even greater question in my own country as concerns the culture of soldiers and their ability to deal with conflict of what is really a quite traditional kind, 11 September 2001 notwithstanding. This question has profound implications for how the culture of soldiers is perverted by the institutional failure to engage the political, social, cultural and economic realities of such nations as Iraq and Afghanistan. However, one can pose this question to the cases of Mexico, North Africa, central Europe, Japan, Korea, Vietnam and elsewhere in the past record of the US soldier. I warn here especially against the tendency of certain journalistic terrible simplifiers and pied pipers to polarize analysis on these issues of politics, war and culture. The absence of a pluralistic foundation in society for the writing of history about contemporary conflict and the military past opens the gates to the seizure of soldierly honor and the martial tradition by figures who have no interest in our agenda here. Hence my reproach of Cruise for trying to put on the carmine-red collar patches stained with blood of a man like Stauffenberg. This episode reflects a more generalized and worrisome trend, a larger tendency in the public mind in which make believe and reality merge with disastrous effects. Certain writers about the past and present intend a kind domestic political cold war in the United States and elsewhere as

part of what is called the long war. These men reflect the union of political and psychological forces in what Clausewitz so well described as the nature of war to seek its absolute form.

The abuse of the catalog of lessons learned can degrade into the formation of legend and myth for partisan political purposes at the expense of democracy and military effectiveness on a constitutional basis. The German experience in the years 1890 until 1920 is duplicating itself in my country, at least as visible in the recent rather pathetic speech by General Ricardo Sanchez to a meeting of military reporters, whom this man blamed for the misfortunes in Iraq. That is, the neo-MacArthurian legends of “never again” digs deeper the domestic political trenches in US partisan terrain where the search is on for the guilty of all stripes. The history of the so-called long war is presently being written, in part, by such men as Victor Davis Hanson, Frederick Kagan, and Ralph Peters in a manner that is incompatible with democratic civil military relations. These men promote legends and myths especially with a tendentious interpretation of war in antiquity and nostalgia for the Second World War.

All of this says more about political culture in the US and rather nothing about the political culture, culture at arms and society of our opponents. These legends and myths, written by figures who pose as historians — but who are really partisan political figures, propagandists, and journalists — direct their anger and hatred against domestic political foes and against the US constitution and the US ideal of the citizen in uniform. The legends they promote are a result, in part, of the intellectual shortcomings and weaknesses of an official exploitation of the past of poor academic quality.

The integration of soldiers and defense civilians into multi-national organizations requires inter cultural expertise on a large scale. The example of central Europeans in the past fifty years somehow to have robbed nationalism at arms of its capacity to cause total war reflects the success of inter cultural expertise of a kind of European cosmopolitanism. This virtue must be extended beyond the narrow frontiers of what was once called the Article VI area of the North Atlantic Treaty. (In saying this, I am well aware that some of you are not in NATO and shall not be, but we are here in the spirit of PfP and reference to the treaty geographical limits is obligatory.) Inter-cultural expertise can thus be seen, despite the shortfalls of such startling ignorance as that of Cohen and Cruise, as being part of Article II of the North Atlantic Treaty, that is clause on the promotion of democracy.

Inter-cultural expertise in the hands of soldiers can also be the means, within the limits of the task, to extend values of security, peace, and freedom to areas that have traditionally been devoid of same. Such inter-cultural expertise can also be fostered by many disciplines in aid of

security and defense education for reform. The historian can and should do his or her fair share in this task, while we all should turn our backs on propaganda masquerading as soldierly virtue.