

# Military History in the West : A Personal View.

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I have recently retired after forty years of teaching military history, most of that time in the Department of War Studies at King's College, London.

I have given lectures in many other countries, including Japan, North America, Germany, and Poland. My numerous publications include War and Society in Europe 1870-1970 and The Pursuit of Victory : from Napoleon to Saddam Hussein, which was published in a Japanese translation in 2000. By reflecting on some aspects of my own experience, and more general developments in the waging and studying of war in the West, I hope to stimulate discussion of similar and contrasting trends in the east and, more specifically in Japan.

I grew up during the Second World war and, as a schoolboy, witnessed the German bombing of London and the dramatic events of 1940 which Churchill immortalised as 'Britain's finest hour'. In reality, much of Britain's war effort between 1939 and 1945 was far from heroic; indeed she suffered an almost unbroken run of defeats and failures between 1939 and 1942, and her eventual place on the winning side would not have been possible without the far larger contributions of the United States and the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the widespread feeling at the time—and for many years afterwards—was that it had been a necessary and even a 'good' war. Britain had stood virtually alone against Nazi Germany in 1940 and early

1941, essentially defending her own interests but also representing the Western ideals of liberty and Parliamentary democracy. The full revelation of the barbarity of Nazism, and especially the horrors of the concentration camps at the end of the war, bestowed a retrospective glow of a righteous crusade on the British war effort. It is also important to stress that, for Britain, it had been a people's war led by a coalition government which inspired a remarkable degree of national unity and a willingness to endure hardships. Winston Churchill, as the symbol of this national war effort seemed to be a demi-god, on a different level to all other politicians, and almost above criticism as the war leader between 1940 and 1945. Much of this sense of pride and achievement has now been eclipsed by the loss of empire and the erosion of national independence and prestige. For later generations the real possibility of defeat by Nazi Germany and the appalling consequences have been hard to grasp; hence the speculations by younger historians that Britain might have negotiated a peace settlement with Hitler in 1940 or 1941, or have given more support to the anti-Nazi resisters.

Most young men, including myself, were required to do

two years of national service, thus giving the post—1945 generation some experience of the armed forces and even of combat. Conscription ended in 1960 so that now only a tiny percentage of the British people have any personal knowledge of military life.

It is easy to understand why post—1945 generations in the west have displayed very different and more pessimistic attitudes to war than their fathers and grandfathers. The Suez fiasco in 1956 starkly exposed Britain's limitations as an independent belligerent, while America's humiliation in Vietnam in the 1970's has dealt a much greater blow to Western confidence—and sharply divided public opinion. Beyond these particular events lay the menace of nuclear weapons with the fear that any conflict involving the great powers would bring immediate escalation and devastation on a global scale.

Needless to say these developments profoundly affected attitudes to the study of war. I have been fortunate to teach only those—from undergraduates to doctoral candidates—who have voluntarily opted to study military history, whereas the majority of young people are indifferent to the subject, with a few even viewing it with



extreme distaste. Even then, many applications suggest that the initial motivation is ethical rather than historical; ie., to prevent future wars or at least curtail their evil effects. I have no objection to this moral approach, but it is at odds with the historian's essential task of understanding the past. I am not impressed by the level of public understanding, even among the educated classes, of military history and strategy. But I must not paint too gloomy a picture : Britain's armed forces, though now of modest size and with virtually no trained reserves, are widely recognised to be excellent both in terms of combat skills and discipline in delicate situations. They are regularly placed first in public opinion polls on the order of respect for the professions—far above politicians, doctors and teachers!

Lack of military experience and failure to study military history seems to me to be prevalent in the British media (especially television) with some regrettable consequences. Criticism of the government, of military decision-making, of the 'establishment' generally is not merely acceptable but vital to the democratic process, but in practice this can easily slip into a hostile attitude which could be

summarised as 'my country or my government always in the wrong'. This is most obviously evident in historical programmes when failures are criticised without understanding of the circumstances in which decisions were made—a classic case being the disastrous first day in the battle of the Somme in 1916. Even successes are bitterly criticised in hindsight, recent examples including an obsession with the Allied bombing of Dresden in 1945 and the Royal Navy's sinking of the Argentinian warship General Belgrano in 1982. Since many young journalists and television documentary-makers are openly leftwing in their politics (as indeed are a very large number of British academics), it is not surprising that Conservative governments were given very rough treatment with Mrs. (now Lady) Thatcher subjected to continuous bitter attacks, including her war leadership, even though she remained popular with the electorate. Tony Blair has had a much easier ride so far, but recently his fervent support of the Americans has provoked some disquiet—anti-Americanism being a deeply-rooted attitude on the British left.

A notable, and generally admirable trend, in Western

attitudes to war has been a marked unwillingness to accept casualties among their own forces ('no more body bags'), and even some sympathy for defeated enemies. For the Americans this unwillingness to accept casualties is surely a legacy of the Vietnam war and of later minor but still painful setbacks in Africa, Iran and the Lebanon. But the Soviet Union's (and now Russia's) heavy loss of mostly conscript soldiers in Afghanistan and Chechnya has also affected, its government's attitude to military operations. Too many bereaved families have become bitterly critical of the regime.

In the American case, reluctance to accept any losses among its own personnel, has resulted in the much—criticized resort to very high level, 'precision' bombing strategy both in Kosovo and Afghanistan. A lesson of these and other recent conflicts is that, however effective modern air operations may be, ground forces are as vital as ever to consolidate and exploit success. There is an obvious risk in confronting fanatical groups who actually glorify self—sacrifice in the cause but it has to be taken. The terrible events of 11<sup>th</sup> September may well have changed American attitudes about risking the lives of their own

personnel, particularly as their forces are now all—volunteer.

I now want to address some practical matters of research and publication in the field of military history, including the all—important question as to whether scholarly work achieves any general influence or is merely of interest to other scholars.

Accurate and comprehensive accounts of the past cannot be written without full access to surviving documentary evidence, official and personal. In the late 1960's public access to official documents in Britain was reduced from fifty to thirty years. Most government files are made available at once after thirty years, but there are some sensitive topics, including intelligence matters, Northern Ireland and controversies affecting the royal family (notably the abdication of King Edward VIII) which remain closed for stated longer periods, or indefinitely. Personal papers of statesmen, military leaders and other notables, are widely available in archives. All require some degree of clearance or academic support to obtain access, and most have strict rules about permission to quote anything from personal files. These are necessary safeguards against unscrupulous use by non—scholars, but they can also



inhibit genuine scholars, for example by prohibiting publication of particular extracts or charging exorbitant fees to do so. A more insidious and deplorable practice, which I have encountered, is to be given privileged access to private papers, followed by pressure to interpret them in a way favourable to the family or individual concerned.

More generally, historians who write about living or only recently deceased public figures come under various kinds of pressure, particularly from widows, sons or other relatives, to portray their hero in an uncritical way. Some will tolerate the revelation of a few minor failings; others expect hagiography.

Among the famous twentieth century British military leaders Haig, Wavell, Wingate and Mountbatten are just a few of the many who have presented problems of this kind to the biographers. Wavell's long-lived widow, for example, brought his first biographer, John Connell, to the brink of a nervous breakdown. Some of the official historians were also put under great stress. I too experienced serious difficulties in writing about Sir Basil Liddell Hart, whom I had known very well during the last decade of his life (he died in 1970). I was given only one

year to complete the book; I was not allowed to write a full biography; and the publisher was prescribed by Lady Liddell Hart. In some respects these restrictions did me a favour by forcing me to focus on the subject's ideas, and I met the conditions. Most reviewers thought my treatment of Liddell Hart's very controversial career and ideas had been fair and balanced. A few academics wrote that my close relationship with Liddell Hart had caused me to be too favourable ('pulling my punches' was the boxing metaphor), but his widow (who only recently died in July 2001) never forgave me for expressing even moderate and carefully phrased criticisms. This painful experience provided an insight into the personal stresses and costs involved in trying to establish the truth about sensitive matters in the recent past. In this case the widow's loyal attempt to prevent the discussion of controversial issues had an unfortunate effect in that the person eventually authorised to write a biography had no personal knowledge of Liddell Hart and, more importantly, could not interview numerous important witnesses who were no longer alive by the mid-1990s.

In a period marked by widespread revulsion against war

there has been an understandable tendency—sometimes carried to ridiculous extremes on British television—to downplay heroic exploits or episodes from the past (such as the battle of Britain in 1940)—and to belittle or denigrate military leaders and statesmen. In principle, as I suggested earlier, this is permissible, and perhaps even a laudable tendency in an open society, but much depends on the accuracy of the evidence and the fairness of the presentation. It hardly needs remarking that many national heroes were not models of propriety in their private lives. It is, however, one thing to dispute their historical achievements (neither Nelson's victory at Trafalgar nor Wellington's at Waterloo were quite as important as national myth suggested), but quite another to insinuate that personal failings somehow diminish public achievements. In Britain, for example, although homo—sexual relations between consenting adults has not constituted a criminal offence for nearly half a century, it is a popular sport on British television to suggest that certain military leaders have been 'gay' with the implication that his reflects badly on their alleged achievement and in effect taints their reputations. Field Marshal Haig's

personality was subjected to this treatment, without any substantial evidence, and attention has turned more recently to Montgomery who found solace in the company of boys after his wife's tragic death. Even if true in these cases, it is hard to see the relevance of this accusation to their respective victories in the two world wars. Curiously Auchinleck, who is known to have been gay, has escaped critical attention!

There has also been a pronounced trend, since the radical movements of the 1960's, to wage class warfare on military reputations. Thus Britain's war leaders in the twentieth century have been criticised as upper class, callous and incompetent (in short 'donkeys'), whereas the true heroes were said to be found amongst ordinary soldiers ('the lions'). These ideas, not wholly false but certainly biased, have attained the status of folk myths (impervious to scholarly modification) through the media of popular films and television series such as Oh What a Lovely War and Blackadder.

As a military historian from an earlier generation (born in 1936 and performed national service in the royal artillery 1954—56), I deplore the radical shift in popular



beliefs and attitudes which results in the farcical caricature of military controversies which deserve respect, or at the very least, a critical understanding based on knowledge. But the fact has to be accepted that in the West we are living in an unhistorical or non—historical era, where the subject is not well taught in schools and where much media presentation is based on ‘presentism’, that is viewing the past periods of history from a standpoint of current preoccupations and values. I have already referred to the current obsession with discovering homosexuality in past leaders; another trend is for governments to apologise to other states for past misdeeds, such as the German apology to Spain for the bombing of Guernica in 1936 . It is hard to see how far back this particular quest could go; Britain should perhaps demand an apology from Denmark and Norway for the Viking raids in the eighth century!

To give a different example of ‘presentism’, there has been a long—running campaign to pardon all the 350 odd soldiers executed for desertion, cowardice and other military crimes in the First World War. Although there were some ‘hard cases’ and injustices among their number, most were guilty under the law as it then stood. It would

be impossible to pardon a few out of a sense of contemporary outrage at past severity, without condemning over again the majority for whom there is no case for revision. This was the reluctant verdict of a Labour government enquiry in 1998 which was hoping to announce a blanket pardon to all those executed, but this has not ended a determined campaign by a small group to re—write history in the light of early twenty—first century values. A tiny number of ‘victims’ seem to be more important than the millions who did their duty in the same stressful circumstances.

The last specific aspect I wish to touch upon is publishing. Most military history in the West is produced by professional writers who expect to make a financial profit from their publications. Consequently, in the main, they choose popular subjects which will appeal to a wide readership and present them in a style and format which will find ready buyers—few or no references is the most obvious aspect. Similarly, commercial publishers have to show an overall profit so that, while they may risk an occasional obscure or unpromising title, they will generally opt for safe and popular subjects. Thus in Britain there are

endless studies of the Waterloo campaign, Lawrence of Arabia, the First World War and, dwarfing all others, Adolf Hitler, whereas writers on less familiar topics find it harder to get encouragement, funding and publication. This is the way things are and there is no point in complaining. On the positive side, Western academics are reasonably well paid and are expected to research and publish work of scholarly importance without undue concern for popular acclaim and large sales. University presses and academic libraries exist to promote such publications which, in many cases, are certain to have very modest sales. One may conclude, positively, that almost no work of scholarly merit will remain unpublished if the author is sufficiently determined. At worst the more esoteric works will be consulted by other experts in the field and in due course may merit a footnote or brief discussion in broader surveys.

This raises the large and difficult question of influence. It is often remarked, critically, that scholars tend to write for a small coterie of experts with a view, not so much to commercial success as to enhance professional standing, secure promotion and invitations to address professional

historians. As I have hinted above, this is an absolutely essential factor in the development and preservation of learning, and is epitomised by the award of a PhD and publication in specialist journals. But in recent decades, following the example of popularising historians like A.J.P. Taylor, many Western scholars have sought to reach a wider readership and a much larger audience on television. In principle I applaud this effort while recognising that it is difficult to serve two masters with very different objectives and standards.

The key question, which I can only raise briefly today, is whether revisionism through scholarly research and publication can modify or even transform well-established and popular interpretations. The answer must be cautiously optimistic, otherwise scholars would not remain 'in business'. But the depressing fact remains that, once an interpretation becomes deeply rooted and generally assumed to be true, then it is usually exceedingly difficult to dig it up and plant a new seed (or idea). The problem is obvious from what I said above: new interpretations may gain acceptance among the tiny number of experts in the field, but how do they then reach the popular market?



By reviews in the 'quality' press, by articles in wide—circulation, magazines and by interviews and lectures, especially on television. Unfortunately one television programme repeating an outmoded interpretation or folk myth will reach a vastly larger and more receptive audience than almost any published book. For example, published attempts to re—interpret Britain's role in the First World War in a more positive way are all too often eclipsed by a thirty minute television documentary stressing 'mud, blood and futility'.

Gradually, however, one must hope and believe that important scholarship will eventually filter through to find a place in school textbooks and will be taken up and incorporated in more popular publications and by television. This modification of received opinion is clearly easier to achieve on issues which are no longer controversial or approached in a state of passionate commitment. Thus, in the case of British history, it is comparatively easy to change accepted interpretations of say, tactics in the Napoleonic wars, the efficiency of the Victorian army or the navy's policy on convoys in the First World War; but much harder on such emotive issues as

British generalship, casualty figures and executions in the First World War or the strategic bombing campaign in the Second. At least there is scope for debate, and scholars must continue to present their arguments as elegantly and persuasively as possible on the assumption that 'the truth' will eventually prevail.

Although some of my remarks may appear to be critical of trends in military history during my career, I should like to end on a positive note. Academic visits to many countries which have suffered traumatic defeats in the twentieth century (France, Germany) or experienced authoritarian, repressive regimes (Poland, Roumania, Greece) have impressed on me how difficult it has been to publish honest history in these countries and, by contrast, how fortunate has been the role of military historians in Britain, the United States and some other Western countries.

Britain has been privileged in two respects. She has enjoyed a liberal open academic tradition since the nineteenth century in which the study of history has been taken seriously as an academic subject, largely free from censorship or pressures to conform to a patriotic view.

Secondly, Britain has been lucky in that her defeats and humiliations in warfare have taken place overseas (Dunkirk, Crete, Singapore, Suez), and have not led to the collapse of the state followed by enemy occupation and decades of internal strife.

There is a Chinese curse with the grim exhortation 'May you live in interesting times'. In my lifetime historians have been grappling with the extremely 'interesting times' of the twentieth century, including two world wars, the Cold War and a vast number of 'low intensity conflicts'. Looking back on this turbulent century I sense that Britain has been very fortunate to survive with comparatively little damage to its traditions, constitution and essential liberties.

It is in this spirit, rather than from any sense of complacency, or superiority, that I offer these reflections on the status of military history in the West as we enter the twenty-first century.