

Calgary Workshop on the History of Strategy

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This is a golden age for military history. Fifty years ago, the discipline had strength in official agencies and the popular market, but stood in an academic ghetto. Soon, it became even less fashionable. Many academics still view it as suspect. These experiences have made military historians defensive and afraid of marginalization, yet in fact their status has risen sharply. They retain their professional audience, rank among the largest components of popular history, and have bolstered their academic base. There are more military historians today than ever before, and more good ones.

The field consists not of one international literature, but of several national ones, isolated from each other in striking ways. None the less, it is as multi-archival, multi-linguistic and comparative as any other form of history. Though neither its practitioners nor detractors like to use the phrase, military history is politically correct. Its works are mature in theory and practice. New areas of the field, such as airpower history, have been born and older ones, like naval history, reborn. The discipline is a loose coalition of sub-disciplines, primarily national (eg. Russian) and thematic (eg. war and society) in nature, all bound by a focus on power, strategy, armed forces and war, on ideas about these matters and the human experience with them. This focus is like that of international and diplomatic history, international relations and strategic studies. Compared to these sister fields, military history focuses more on how force is embodied and exercised. These links enrich military history, as do those to policy makers. Many military historians work in service academies or for official agencies in which historical understanding guides the formulation of policy. The influence cuts both ways; since

1980, the concerns of military institutions about doctrine, intelligence, operational art, and the revolution in military affairs, have shaped scholarly research and writing.

At the heart of war is combat. So too, studies of campaigns and the human experience of war remain central to military history, but neither battles nor generals using armies in a rational-instrumental fashion, are the whole of war. Beyond this operational dimension, three other schools approach military history from social, intellectual, and strategic aspects. First, a new sub-discipline emerged in the 1960s, which studies the relationship between war and societies; how peoples affect and are affected by armed forces and their struggles. To students of war and society, masculinity is a military issue. This area is politicised. Some use it to legitimize their presence in academe, others see it as a threat to real military history. Second, works of intellectual history have been central to academic military history, explaining, for example, that armies fought badly because they thought that way. Recently, the American military's emphasis on doctrine has magnified this impulse, producing a literature on how military services learn and incorporate knowledge into their practice. The third of these schools, strategic history, simultaneously is part of military and international history; its practitioners come from both fields and produce works which fit each one. Strategic history examines the diplomatic role of force and the military part of foreign policy, diplomacy in war and power in peace, and the formulation of what sometimes is called strategic foreign policy. It has many foci. These include the nature, and the balance, of power; how shifts in its reality and image affect international politics; how intelligence and perceptions shape behaviour; how states choose between strategies and interests, formulate policy and harmonize the economic, military and diplomatic components of power; what force cannot do and what war is good for.

Military history, finally, is tied to strategic studies, and always has been. Both of these fields began at the same time, the late nineteenth century, with the same men, the first generation of what once were called "defence intellectuals", whether civilian or military in background, like Julian Corbett in Britain, Hans Delbruck in Germany, and Alfred Thayer Mahan in the United States. They sought to understand war and force, and to integrate history and strategy with contemporary policy and public debate. Then, and now, military history has a public audience in mind, and at hand: a great voluntary readership. Military historians write with a public purpose—to educate

citizens and statesmen about war and strategy, so to ensure that past experiences enlighten present decisions about future policy.

Those traditions inspire this volume. Over the past two years, The Centre for Military and Strategic Studies at The University of Calgary, and The German Armed Forces Military History Research Office at Potsdam, have hosted workshops on strategic history. The core members are German and Canadian historians, but scholars of other nationalities are welcome participants. The areas under debate vary by time and topic, spanning the ancient and contemporary periods, ranging from operations to grand strategy. The central themes, however, always are strategic policy in peacetime, integrating military, political, financial and diplomatic issues; and the links between the preparation for combat in peacetime, and the performance of armies, navies, air forces and states during war. In principle, scholars always regard these topics as important, but in practice, those matters rarely receive the attention they require. Those workshops aim to promote scholarship on strategic history, to provoke debate between specialists, and to make history useful not just to specialists, but to the public. In particular, The Centre for Military and Strategic Studies, The German Armed Forces Military History Research Office, and The Journal of Military and Strategic Studies, use this opportunity to disseminate freely, through open access electronic means, serious historical research on strategic policy, presented from a comparative and multinational perspective, for public education across the world.

This volume is one fruit of these labours. Its articles fall in two groups. The first is the relationship between strategy, doctrine and military preparations in peacetime, and operations in wartime, with particular reference to how military institutions adjust to changes with enemies, environments, and competitions. The articles in this section—by Gerhard Gross, Michael Neiberg and Christian Stachelbeck-- all use detailed studies, focusing largely on the German army, to assess how military institutions and commanders learn, and to consider the links between theory and practice. This area has been central to the study of military operations in recent decades, as historians address issues like the learning curve of this or that military institution, or the relationship between doctrine and performance in another. It is dogged by a perennial problem, the tendency to treat comparative issues in a national competitive fashion. This reflex disfigures most works in the field. It takes particular forms in views of the military

performance of the German army, which most commentators regard highly, and many treat virtually as gods of war. The latter approach begs the question: if Germans really were to generalship, what they are to musical composition, then how did they manage to lose two world wars in a row? Brahms would have done better, let alone Bach. Unlike most commentators on that issue, fortunately, the authors in this collection know what they are talking about.

Their analyses are dispassionate and illuminating. Gerhard Gross focuses on German command at the higher operational and strategic levels. After emphasizing the admiration which commentators often express for German operational qualities, he analyses their development and performance between 1871-1945, explaining the roots of this behavior, and the strengths and weaknesses of the approach. He carefully contextualizes its characteristics, especially noting the limits to the famous auftragstaktik (mission oriented command), which did not work quite as its idolaters imagine. He concludes on a somber note. Both the success of German operations and the failure of its strategy, stemmed from the same central root, an attempt to achieve a continental hegemony which Germany was too weak to acquire, but insufficiently wise to eschew. Christian Stachelbeck assesses the question from the other end of the army, assessing command, learning and combat performance within one German formation during the First World War. The 11th Bavarian Infantry Division, good but not elite, is a useful marker for the experiences of normal German divisions during the war. His account, based on detailed empirical study, is an excellent example of operational history at the divisional level. It isolates variables such as how command and training worked within the 11th Bavarian Infantry Division, how much autonomy commanders had, and how they adapted to changes in circumstances. Both Gross and Stachelbeck trace German efforts to prepare for and conduct defensive warfare during both world wars, an overlooked area in which its performance has many weaknesses.

Michael Neiberg compares the strategy, command and operations of the armies of Germany and the Allied and Associated Powers during the First World War, with particular focus on 1918. He shows the difficulties which both sides found in combining grand strategy, with what could be done operationally in the field. His critique, from a strategic level, of all of their operations during 1918 is shrewd, and devastating as regards Germany. He treats Ferdinand Foch most sympathetically of all the senior

commanders, but Nieberg shows that imperfect political consequences flowed from the generalissimo's able and surprisingly humane approach to war. Foch, Nieberg shows, was an officer who could learn, and the only one who commanded the western front effectively; the best general of the war. He also emphasizes the strengths of Foch's system of command. Certainly, this approach put an upper cap to the politicization of field command, and was essential to survival when the German offensives almost split the British and French commanders, Douglas Haig and Philip Petain. Foch was fundamental to the turning point of the campaign, the French annihilation of German forces during July 1918. On the other hand, Foch's system left national armies operating under very loose guidance, which was irrelevant when they knew what they were doing and succeeded at it. During the Hundred Days, Foch was a fly on the wheel of Commonwealth forces, as they shattered the German army.

The second group of articles, on strategy, cover a wider range of times and topics. Through studies of a tradition of national strategy, a decision on one issue by leaders of a single nation, and an assessment of decisions taken in several capitals during a multilateral crisis, they address questions such as: what is strategy? must it rest on articulated concepts and reasoned considerations, or can it exist when ideas are inchoate? how is strategy linked to politics? who makes decisions? how rational can a strategy be? how far can intentions be effected, and effects be intended?

Tony Mullis assesses the grand strategy of Anglo-American settlers in North America, toward Amerindians and expansion, from first encounter to final conquest. Thus, he addresses one of the greatest and longest struggles over territory on earth between 1600 and 1900, one rarely seen as a single topic or a military one, or analyzed from a unified, or a strategic, perspective. For students of first nations, these matters usually are treated essentially as a cultural issue; commentators on American military and strategic history scarcely treat them in detail at all. Yet they are fundamental to the rise, and to the habits of thought and practice on matters of power politics, of the greatest state of our time, not to mention the fate of peoples. Mullis's most novel argument is that any grand strategy at all, let alone the same one, underlay these events. His powerful yet particular assessment uses American culture and politics, to explain the roots for a behavior which often occurred below the surface of state: to show what

Americans thought about war and Amerindians, and how they acted on these ideas and conquered a continent.

Holger Herwig analyses the decisions for war taken in the capitals of the major powers of Europe, during July and August 1914. The July crisis triggered the greatest and most destructive event of modern history. It has become central to theories about the outbreak of war in the fields of international relations and strategic studies. Perhaps the largest literature explaining the causes for any phenomena, addresses the outbreak of the First World War. Herwig assesses the major theories used, over the past century, to explain these decisions, and compares them to the evidence on the matter. One by one, he dismisses the grand structural arguments used to explain why these states went to war—whether social and intellectual forces, such as the impact of public opinion or ideas like social darwinism, along with arguments that military time tables, or accident, caused the war. Instead, he argues, decisions for war were made by small groups of men in each capital, taken on instrumental grounds, based on *realpolitik*, deliberate—part of a move in a competition, which they thought they understood. The system worked as intended, but with effects no one expected.

Christine Leppard addresses the decision of the Canadian government in 1943 to send a Corps to participate in the invasion of Italy. In the process, Canada divided its forces in Europe into two groups, so wrecking an established military and political principle, to keep all its soldiers in Europe under unified Canadian command. She concludes that confusion, incompetence and crossed wires among Canadian politicians and generals produced this decision, allowing ephemeral political needs to compromise greater aims. Her work is linked to a broader topic, often discussed in passing, but never more: the politicization of field command in Anglo-American forces. These issues are best known in their most personalized and sensationalized forms, such as the relationships between British and American commanders like Mark Clerk or Bernard Montgomery, but they are symptomatic of a problem which merits systematic treatment. In such a study, Canadian experiences in Europe, like Australian ones in the Pacific, will illuminate broader matters. Leppard also highlights a broader pattern of Canadian grand strategy: one of fitting into an alliance, ceding overall direction to a great ally, often making strategic decisions essentially for reasons of internal politics, or alliance management, and trying somehow to control the sacrifices and ensure that they

support its interests. These patterns have recurred in recent Canadian strategic decisions.

This issue of *The Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* also includes an article which addresses strategic studies rather than military history, and was not part of the workshop which inspires the rest of the works at hand, but does fit their themes. David McDonough offers a powerful assessment of the literature on three issues, the nature of grand strategy, the idea of strategic culture, and the question of whether Canada has anything like a grand strategy, in the form either of tradition, or of clearly articulated policies. While McDonough seeks to fuse these topics into a lens and grind it so to bring Canadian interests and strategy properly into focus, his analysis and conclusions have a broader value. The concept of “strategic culture” has stagnated in recent decades. It has proven hard to move past the conclusions and controversies of first generation scholars, or to give an edge of specificity, or falsifiability, to an idea which intuitively does seem to have power for description and analysis. McDonough’s application of this literature to Canadian experiences, advances the concept of “strategic culture”. It also marks an important phase in arguments about the existence, and the nature, of a Canadian grand strategy.

History does not teach answers, but it can raise questions with contemporary resonance. These essays certainly do so. How far can anyone hope to achieve their intentions precisely as intended, in a multilateral crisis? How can military institutions of the 21st century learn to prepare for their tasks? How can politicians and generals learn the need for and the nature of strategy, except through the bitter experience of failure? A study of history may illuminate such questions, and help to enlighten present decisions about future policy.

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