

THE RETURN OF EUROPEAN HISTORY AND THE NECESSARY IMPLICATIONS FOR ADVANCED OFFICER EDUCATION

Why this memo

Russia has returned to the international scene as an energetic revisionist power. It signals openly the intent to challenge the post-1991 world order. This became ever clearer by Russian propaganda from late 2011 and by her actions from spring 2014.



The developments in and by Russia are only one symptom of a widespread reaction to liberalism in the spirit of our time, both in domestic and international politics. That this seemingly takes place as a midterm reaction to a serious crisis in the international financial system makes it an uncomfortable echo of developments in the 1930s. The situation has created an open field for delicate Russian exploitation by misinformation and innuendo of the widening cracks in the democratic consensus in both large and small Western States and in the cooperation in the EU.

However, the obvious risks that the quick weakening of the interest in international open cooperation and solidarity seem unrecognised by the proudly ahistorical Western academic environment that now dominates the discourse.

This means – among other symptoms of serious dementia in the academic elites - that the trends of the advanced officer education systems in many Western countries remain unable to adjust the ongoing development. They continued towards continued de-professionalization and emphasis on an academic façade irrelevant to the core roles of senior officers. It was a development that created empty Potemkin officials in uniform unfitted to serve their states' needs in the new, but normal, situation.

The situation was aggravated by the fact that even senior officers no longer have personal memories of how to prepare for operate in high intensity, basically symmetric international war.

Short Memorandum by Michael Hesselholt Clemmesen, BGen (DAA, Retd.)

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This memorandum will *both* outline what has happened during the last two and a half decades *and* what may be done to readjust to the requirements quickly.

The background and experience of the author and their implications

Using my double education of a regular general staff officers and an academically educated historian, I directed the development of Danish joint staff officer education in the five years from 1989 to 1994 in the transition from the Cold War framework to the more varied and less clear requirements of the follow-on period.

After familiarizing myself with the situation, requirements and limitations of the Baltic States as Defence Attaché to all three from 1994 to 1997, I triggered and guided the creation of the Baltic Defence College and led its development in Tartu from 1998 to end 2004.

The basis of the original staff and civil servant courses was a combination of a partly critical reaction to my experience the Danish less than clear professional focus and inspiration from the education of other countries from the classical Prussian-German general staff officer education to the modern educations at the USMC University and the then developing new British Joint Services Command and Staff College.



From the June 2000 graduation of the first Baltic Defence College Staff Course.

Fortunately many of the graduates on the picture are now in senior command and staff positions in their countries' armed forces.

In bullet form the courses of the Baltic Defence College during its first four years were based on the following understanding of the roles of the senior officer in the roles of planner, advisor and commander:

- By systematic analysis he/she should be able to identify the various possible intelligence-force-doctrine combination options for any conflict-defence-deterrence mission, and be able to grasp the military forces' roles in relation to the other political strategy means: economic and informational/moral.

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- In the joint staff course the emphasis was on the mission of territorial defence of the Baltic States. In the later developed short war college course, the emphasis became general.
- The officer should become able to advice senior officers and politicians on the more likely risks and costs of the various options.
- After a formal decision the officer should be able to plan for and manage its implementation. Seeking and applying insight from historical cases and combining that with personal experience he should be able to address likely friction.
- The officer should be brought to understand his profession as theoretical-practical one somewhat similar to that of a leading medical doctor or construction engineer, but different both due to the political framework that must guide his actions and the independent will of an enemy.
- The education should both nourish an officer ethos mirroring the time and the officer role in a liberal democracy *and* reinforce the will and ability to represent the military professional analysis in a dialogue with representatives of other professions or theoretical academic backgrounds.
- A focused education in Defence Management should ensure that the way human, financial and material resources became employed was not only generally honest, efficient and rational, but would mirror the special character and purpose of military organisations.
- As in the educations that inspired the development of the Baltic Defence College, the central pedagogic method was the application of formal, systematic methods if analysis at army, joint operational and strategic levels to real and credible – not generic - scenarios. This took place both individually and mixed syndicates of 5-6 students or in larger ad hoc formal staffs.
- The education included the development of an individual master level “*major*” thesis, where the officer was required to work, argue and document according to normal academic requirements. Independent “*out of the box*” thinking was encouraged. The work could be seen in the classical German General Staff tradition of the “*Winterarbeit*” and “*Denkschrift*” meant to inspire professional criticism and innovation.

The Post-Modern Officer Advanced Education and his/her Service Experience

By the turn of the century Western political, academic and public opinion on future military activities became dominated by the tacit assumption that the period of great power intensive wars had ended, at least in Europe.

On reflection it is now my understanding that what happened now was the result of interplay in a troika consisting of three actors: the liberal politicians, the academic revisionist prophets of post-modernism (that was the end result of the 1968 youth rebellion) and the military leadership of the time.

The two former were always and remain united in their incomprehension and rejection of military logic and ethos as relevant in normal time. On their side the military leadership was all too happy to retreat into normal and comfortable activities. In the Interwar Period this had been to elite privileges in the colonies, unstressed and ordered life in garrisons or narrow-minded indulgence in the promises of emerging technology. With the loss of colonies, only the two latter options remained.

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Nourished by the basic human sins of opportunism and intellectual lethargy, the military leadership abandoned their professional responsibility, left the field to the shallow academic nomenclature and sought whatever doctrinal and management fashion “*the Emperor*” and his self-appointed court found relevant. The traditional European military history and the linked professional experience and requirements had become politically and academically irrelevant.

What remained would be various types of limited “*New Wars*” that happened in the unfortunately still undeveloped parts of the wars. Here the West would have the choice to intervene in support of human and political “progress”, humanity pressed by media images of suffering or to contain the risks of spill-over.



Visions of the “new wars”.

In such wars smaller Western states only were to participate to spread the political risk by being present to show solidarity with the larger intervening states. This meant that the requirement for professionalism became reduced to a basic single service level that ensured that the small units sent had a fundamental technical and tactical training status that ensured that their cannon fodder mission was not too obvious.*

I shall come back to the implications for the *formal* advanced officer education, because that was only a secondary effect of the changes. Most of what an officer learns is defined by the character of his service experience through his formative service period of the first ten-to-twenty years. For naval and air officers the operations of the last two and a half decades after the 1991 Gulf War have taken place in an environment of simple and asymmetric Western advantage. Sea control and air command has always been undisputed.

However, for land force officers the framework for the development of their professionalism has been far worse. Even the actual service of the present generation of army generals has been next to irrelevant for their preparation for territorial or any other large scale combined arms or intensive joint operations.

For more than 20 years all exercises have been partly or fully scripted, one dimensional, procedural-drill training for the type of mission then foreseen, being it peacekeeping, peace-enforcing or stability/counterinsurgency operations. They never experienced the – now assumed irrelevant – activity-service cycle that had dominated the formation of army officers since the late 19th Century.

* Mainly, but not exclusively, built on an analysis of the situation in Denmark during the last fifteen years.

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This cycle for the full maintenance of army professional level would every one or two years go through the following phases and linked to a specific piece of geography and assumed Order of Battle:

- 1) Analysis of the mission and options and tentative plan.
- 2) Combined arms reconnaissance at formation and unit levels that includes cooperation with local authorities, neighbours and allies.
- 3) Development and approval of the final plan.
- 4) Training regular and reserve units and educating officers according to the requirements of that plan.
- 5) Exercising mobilisation and development of force cohesion and combat readiness.
- 6) Gaming and testing the defence plan to identifying weaknesses.

A renewed cycle followed as political priorities, organisation and assumptions about the enemy changed, or when a commanding general with different professional views and priorities took over. The activity-learning cycle filled the years of all army officers and gave them real, practical education all through the 20th Century until the early 1990s.

By the end of the 20th Century both the senior officers and the senior civil servants of Defence and Finance Ministries seemed to conclude that the demanding development of full traditional professionalism as anachronistic. For the “*New War*” mission options the responsible political-military professional dialogues about risks and options were seen as irrelevant. What the political scientist Colin Gray has defined as the “*Strategy Bridge*”[†] became crowded with more theoretical political scientists, idealistic-ideological international law specialists and “*spin-doctors*”, all advising without the total professional responsibility that should be expected of the senior professional military advisor.

The senior officers seemed to have vacated the “*bridge*” voluntarily, considering their mission as reduced to the production and management of smart looking symbolic contributions according to the latest “*New Public Management*” and NATO “*buzz-word*” fads.

The mixed replacement crowd on the “*bridge*” compensated for its lack of competency in defining practical policy instruments and in policy implementation by endless wordy discussion of the theoretical character of the novelty. The crowd members never sought similar conflict cases in the past that might nourish insight into the present situation and into the risks and opportunities of various response options. Their discourse took and takes place within their various theoretical “*group-think*” assumptions on such issues as the obsolescence of conscription and the general utility of special operations forces and precision strikes.

When history returned all these advisors told their satisfied political masters that the situation remained safe. NATO was vastly superior in number of personnel, total defence budgets and sum of hardware.

It was invisible and therefore irrelevant to these happy amateurs in suits and uniform:

- *that* neither the personnel, nor their units were trained, equipped or organised for fighting – partly because by the adoption of civilian working hours,
- *that* a massive amount of the money was misspent on aping “*New Public Management*” requirements,
- *that* a large part of the military hardware was unmaintained and unserviceable, and

[†] For the communication and discussion of the political intent and priorities from one end and military options, opportunities and risks before and during war from the other.

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- *that* the units remained “*malpositioned*” far away from Eastern Europe and without any mental readiness for intensive warfare against a similar enemy force.

No wonder that similar amateur attitudes had come to guide changes of the formal advanced education of officers. As their traditional professionalism and responsible advice about options and risks were seen as irrelevant by their employers, peers, neighbours and families, the officers seeking promotion first of all sought civilian type diplomas and academic credits, no matter if they were relevant in (which?) war.

Whether the substance of the education was professionally relevant was rather unimportant, because nobody was able to explain to them what that would mean. As all assumed that they would never be required to command, staff or advice in a large scale, high-intensity international war, education became an exercise in collection of loosely or unconnected un-connected rubberstamps.

As long as the education did not demand too much effort, it was not their responsibility to worry about relevance. After they had left the remaining few and small units, service as armed forces officer was just another work, and few, if any, thought that the reading of military history of major wars may be relevant for other reasons than entertainment. The pseudo-scientific and over-theoretical teaching of military studies replaced professional analytic education, that – as mentioned above - applied formal analytic methods to prepare officers for complex combined, joint and all-agencies staff work and command responsibility. Command and Staff Colleges and War Colleges morphed into “*National Defence Universities*” designed for the period until world peace became universal.

One can hope that the politically irresponsible crowd that occupied the “*Strategy Bridge*” during the waning happy years of wars of choice will hopefully soon realise that they are redundant with the exception of those few with relevant and updated knowledge of Russia.

Few of these have any preparation for practical (rather than over-theoretical) analysis of operational problems, and the same unfortunately apply to the generals and admirals that should stand next to them for the reasons given above. And neither of the two groups have the now urgent understanding of nuclear issues and risks that are now becoming crucial.

Advanced officer education activities after the return of European history



Portent of the returning history.

As the premise of an end of traditional European history proved fundamentally flawed, it is both logical and urgent to break with the shallow post-modernistic nonsense and return to a fully professional advanced officer education that is updated to include preparations to confront the full spectrum threat that the Russia has chosen to employ in its *“warfare”* against the West. It should be adjusted to include both nuclear and crisis management issues, and for the time being it should include experiencing the different elements of the *“cycle”* outlined above.

Neither the theory dominated, ahistorical, non-scenario application teaching of officers in strategy and operations, nor the similarly political science staffed and led think tanks and advisory cells inside or formally outside government can supply the now urgent professional education, advice, management and potentially even leadership in the now threatening illiberal future.

As the challenge from the deliberately illiberal Russia represents an already present danger, the education effort of the Baltic States (and others) should from yesterday onwards include short crash courses for senior officers and staff members that gave them an introduction to the cycle in a likely scenario framework.

Each course in the Baltic States should have participation from Finland, Sweden, SHAPE, MNCNE, the U.S., Poland and Germany to gain maximum benefit from the activity, both in deterrence signalling and by ensuring realistic depth and complexity in the discussions.

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Denmark is not really relevant in this context, because we no longer have regular or reserve forces with a potential for contributing to the defence of the region, and because we have led the way in a radical post-modern demolition of a formerly reasonably good professional advanced officer education.



And one much closer to us.