

6/10-2009

'The lessons of Napoleon for lesser men'

Text of communication for XXXV CIHM

This paper is an essay giving the synthesis of a personal twenty years long lecturing failure at staff and war college levels.

The deepest and most sophisticated analysis of the revolution in warfare that followed the French revolution - and Napoleon's dynamic harnessing of its energy - took place in Germany. The reason was the combination of the deep defeat in 1806 and the fact that the Prussian army was in the first phase of a thorough reform debate when the disasters of that year proved that the conservatives were wrong and the military reformers led by Gerhard von Scharnhorst were right. That realisation had painful to an army leadership who had continued to believe that its mechanical application of the inheritance of Frederick the Great still made it superior to Napoleon's forces, and the humiliation made it deeply motivated to learn.

The reform debate started just after the First Coalition Wars. Prussia had proven incapable of beating the enthusiastic, but superficially trained, French troops during the fighting. Georg Heinrich von Berenhorst analysed and explained the changes that had led to the failure in his *Betrachtungen über die Kriegskunst* published shortly after the end of this first round of the wars. He underlined as had Jacques de Guibert that the positive motivation of the troops was a crucial factor in fighting. This motivation should be built on a bond between state, nation and army.

After his move from Hannover to Prussian service in 1801, the experienced and sophisticated artillery officer, Gerhard von Scharnhorst, created a military debating society in Berlin to enhance critical understanding of the new reality, and he worked as educator to develop and nourish an elite group of young officers that could support and catalyse reform. However, very little could be achieved in the deeply conservative Berlin military establishment before the humiliating total defeat of the well drilled main Prussian armies in 1806 at Jena-Auerstedt.

From 1808 to 1810 Scharnhorst led the military side of the intended deep reforms that should create an effective modern army, and from 1813 Tauroggen Convention the now reformed forces were employed against the French. As Scharnhorst died of the results of a battle wound that summer it was left to his disciple and reform secretary, Carl von Clausewitz, to publish his own personal further development of the reformers' analysis of the revolution of war they had experienced since 1795.

Clausewitz concluded that one had to accept that wars varied dramatically as their character would always be influenced by the ever changing belligerent societies. As war had to be seen and treated as an instrument of the political leadership of the fighting society, one had to accept the full subordination of the general to that leadership. Because of that subordination and because the meeting in combat on the battlefield would be influenced by uncertainty and chance in a fundamental way, it was not possible to develop a positive and prescriptive guide for how to fight. Conditions on the battlefield would be

dominated by the fog and friction of war. Success depended on the acceptance of this basic condition, which also meant that effective generalship required professional intuition, honed and developed through a combination of broad professional studies and personal experience.

The unavoidable chaotic conditions on the battlefield meant that the subordinate commanders had to be capable of acting independently in a way that was based on both a common general understanding of war and combat and an insight into the requirements of the actual war and specific battle conditions.

The only other guide to the future general from the Napoleonic and earlier wars was *firstly* that the massing of superior forces for battle enhanced the chance of success, and *secondly* that defence was the stronger form of war. The first advice was rather self-evident, the second difficult to accept. Not much help to a German soldier from such an interpretation of Napoleon. After all the German army was an organisation normally forced to compensate for weakness by a series of fast, offensive blows using its central position in Europe among the powers.

Such general lessons could neither fill the requirements of the emerging military profession of the 19th century nor of the large consolidated professions of the 20th and 21st centuries. Two decades of trying to educate staff course students in military, naval and air theory has made it completely clear to me that what may inspire and satisfy a future Napoleon or emerging Eisenhower only frustrates any normal mid grade career officer. The busy students now ask, as they asked then, for principles, bullets as checklists, buzzwords, rules to learn and follow, the simpler the better. It will be considered especially relevant if it seems to be applicable without deep thinking, without further reading.

Military history teaching should – in their eyes - give examples to follow, not add the framework of the event, not highlight the uncertainties, fog and friction that will have to be handled to operate successfully in real war. Only one type of war should be taught, normally a symmetric interstate conflict. The focus should be on tactics and operations. The general character of war and the realities of political-military strategic interaction were seen as somebody else's business. What was outside and above the narrow, professional guidance – the '*nur militäre*' – should not be in theory and teaching.

Thus it was logical that the analysts of revolutionary warfare continued the tradition of the military theorists of the Enlightenment, such as the French marshal Maurice de Saxe and later the English geometric warfare theorist Henry Lloyd.

As these predecessors the new theorists concentrated on how to fight and win in the new wars. The first was the Prussian Dietrich Heinrich Freiherr von Bülow, who published the *Geist des Neueren Kriegssystems* in 1799. He wrote at the same time as Berenhorst, but endeavoured to the degree possible to press the new war into the scientific framework of Lloyd. A couple of years later, another Prussian, Christian von Massenbach, initiated a reform of his country's general staff, organising it to conduct scientific, military-geographical theatre campaign planning.

However, the Swiss Antoine Henri de Jomini became by far the most influential of the new theorists. The observations of his *Précis de l'Art de la Guerre* from 1838 had been developed gradually to become a well organised pedagogic guide for military professionals in their craft. In Germany general Karl Wilhelm Freiherr von Willisen argued in line with Jomini against Clausewitz' views in books and as the Arts of War professor at the War Academy.

These positivist theorists believed that it would be possible to plan and conduct war in a scientific way, as an engineering project, following linear logics. Thorough calculations and detailed planning could more or less guarantee victory by minimising uncertainty and chance. That was what Jomini claimed to have extracted from his close study of Napoleon's operational genius. If the politician accepted to delegate the freedom to conduct the war without harmful interference, and the general followed the recommendations of '*Précis*', there was the best possible chance that the general would be able to repay his ruler with a victory.

There are many reasons why Massenbach and Jomini ended dominating the lessons from Napoleon. The mass armies required officers with a standardised level of competence. To achieve this, the armies needed manuals that were easily understandable to busy lecturers, and usable for teaching and control of learning levels. The ever growing staff bureaucracies required officers with a common and positive attitude to what could be achieved by planning. '*Vom Kriege*' was as unsuited as '*Précis*' was well suited as a professional manual.

The prestige of the military as a scientifically based profession required a unique professional knowledge. As doctors cured diseases, the legal profession distributed justice and engineers built bridges with a minimum direct political interference during the process, the military profession would win wars. The profession needed a plan for how to fight and win that they could present to the politicians, a plan that accepted professionals agreed with. The more this was built on scientific presentation of numbers, the more convincing. In order for own state to be able to control events, the presented plan had to be offensive.

During the second half of the 19th Century, fighting on land became increasingly tied to the railways for mobilisation, operational transport and logistics. This development pushed the education and work of the staff officers still more in the direction of the scientific calculations of the engineer. The generally accelerating trend in the development of artillery and other weapons and the resulting requirement for technological insight had the same effect.

The fact that education at the elite U.S. West Point Military Academy aimed at producing engineers rather than professional army officers made that development even clearer in the U.S. Army than in other countries. The emphasis on scientific management was further reinforced by the character of the operations during the American Civil War, the first major war fought by professional American army officers. It became the first war where movement and logistics became dependent on railways through wilderness. After the end of the war the United States of America became the most dynamic and quickest developing industrial country in the world, reinforcing the belief that there had to be a scientific-technical solution to every conceivable military problem.

This technical optimism has dominated American warfare up till now. A widespread naivety about what the management of superior logistics and precision fire power could achieve in modern war led to the empty victory in Iraq 2003.

Until 1941 the U.S. Navy was guided by the Jomini-inspired Mahan. Concentrating on the basic parts of the writings of the sophisticated analyst of naval strategy supported a simplified belief that the only or at least best path to undisputed sea control was a decisive naval battle with the enemy main fleet. In Great Britain

Julian Corbett was met with a fundamentally critical attitude when he worked to encourage a more analytical approach to naval strategy. Even today naval staff course students see Mahan, built on their simple version of his message, as their prophet.

The linear, engineer view of war has always dominated American air warfare theory. Ever since the Interwar Period the leading air corps (later air force) officers have believed that victory in war is achieved by a scientific distribution of precision bombardment.

In Russia Jomini's influence was direct. The Swiss was a Russian general from 1823 onwards and inspired the creation of the Russian Imperial Military Academy in 1832 that was renamed the Nicholas General Staff Academy in 1855 during the last period Jomini advised the Zar. Until the end of the Soviet Union, Russian operational art used terms and definitions that were inspired by the terminology and scientific attitude of the '*Précis*'. It is also logical to link the other element in Russian military organisation to another post-Enlightenment reaction to French revolutionary warfare, that of Massenbach. Dmitry Alexeevich Milutin decentralised the scientific strategic-geographic preparations for the initial phase of war to military districts along the borders of the empire. It is only a mild simplification to see this development as an adaptation of the Prussian's strategic staff planning to the geographic reality of the vast and under-developed Russian empire.

Even in Prussia and the German Empire, only some of Clausewitz's conclusions were accepted. The main field where he influenced German thinking to a unique degree was in the understanding of battlefield conditions as fundamentally chaotic. This meant a widespread understanding in the German Army that victory after the first contact with the enemy depended on delegation of authority. Success also depended on the ability of the commanders – guided by their senior general staff officer – to use the freedom of action in an appropriate way. In other areas, the early 20th-Century German Army ended up as 'Jominian'-scientific as most armies of the other continental powers.

In France the effects of the 1870-71 defeats combined with republican self confidence led to a naive belief just before 1914 that victory in a new war would go to nationalistic-enthusiastically aggressive French soldiery. The resulting senseless slaughter by German machineguns and artillery soon led to a tactical regression to scientific management of all movement to ensure effective suppression of enemy weapons before the French infantry moved.

Only the 19th and early 20th century British Army acted as if it knew and accepted Clausewitz' rejection of a prescriptive theory of warfare. However, the basis of the British attitude was not deep studies of the character of war and combat. It was simply built on the pragmatic and correct observation that any simplified theory would be harmful and irrelevant as the British Army could never know where it was going to fight its next war, and how that war or police mission would be. A British commander had to maintain a pragmatic and open mind.

Thus when armed forces tried to learn and use the lessons of the Napoleonic Wars, most only built on the pseudo-scientific, Jominian simplifications, designed for use by lesser men than the genius.

Select bibliography

ARON, Raymond, 1976, "Clausewitz. Philosopher of War." London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.

BASSFORD, Christopher, 1994, "Clausewitz in English. The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America 1815-1945." New York, Oxford University Press.

BIDDLE, Tami Davis, 2002, "Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare. The Evolution of British and American Ideas about Strategic Bombing, 1914-1945." Princeton, Princeton University Press.

BROICHER, Andreas, 2005, "Gerhard von Scharnhorst. Soldat – Reformier – Wegbereiter. Aachen. Helios.

CLAUSEWITZ, Carl von, 1832, "Vom Kriege." 17th Edition by Werner Hallweg 1951, Bonn, Fred. Dümmmlers Verlag.

CLAUSEWITZ, Carl von, 1832, "On War". Edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret 1976, Princeton University Press.

CLEMMESSEN, Michael H. Clemmesen, 1986, "Clausewitz – Liv og Person." *Om krig*, Volume III. Copenhagen, Rhodos.

CLEMMESSEN, Michael H. Clemmesen, 2007, "Den klare tanke og brutal konsekvente handling." Editor Kartni Winter, *Rusland før og nu. Essays tilegnet generalmajor Karsten J. Møller*, Copenhagen, Royal Danish Defence College.

CORBETT, Julian S., 1911, "Some Principles of Maritime Strategy." London, Brassey's.

DYKE, Carl van, 1990, Russian Imperial Military Doctrine and Education, 1832-1914." New York, Greenwood.

ECHEVARRIA II, Antulio J., 2000, "After Clausewitz. German Military Thinkers before the Great War." Lawrence, University Press of Kansas.

GAT, Azar, 1989, "The Origins of Military Thought. From the Enlightenment to Clausewitz," Oxford, Clarendon.

GAT, Azar, 1992, "The Development of Military Thought. The Nineteenth Century." Oxford, Clarendon Press.

HAGERMAN, Edward, 1992, "The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare. Ideas, Organization, and Field Command." Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press.

HANDEL, Michael, 1986, "Clausewitz in the Age of Technology." Editor Michael Handel, Clausewitz and Modern Strategy, London, Frank Cass.

HARRISON, Richard W., 2001, "The Russian Way of War. Operational Art, 1904-1940." Lawrence, The University Press of Kansas.

HOWARD, Michael, 1965, "Jomini and the Classical Tradition in Military Thought." Editor Michael Howard, *The Theory and Practice of War. Essays presented to Captain B. H. Liddell Hart*, London, Cassell.

JOMINI, Antoine Henri de, 1855 (in English 1862), "The Art of War." Philadelphia, Lippincott.

LIDDELL-HART, B. H., 1967, "Strategy. The Indirect Approach." London, Faber & Faber.

LUVAAS, Jay, 1965, "The Education of an Army. British Military Thought, 1815-1940." London, Cassell.

MARWEDEL, Ulrich, 1978, "Carl von Clausewitz. Persönlichkeit und Wirkungsgeschichte seines Werkes bis 1918." Boppard am Rhein, Harald Boldt Verlag.

MERZALOW, Andrej N. & MERZALOWA, Ljudmila A., "Antoine-Henri Jomini – der Begründer der wissenschaftlichen Militärtheorie. Eine Bewertung aus russischer Sicht." Zürich, VDF Verlag.

OLSEN, John Andreas, 2007, "John Warden and the Renaissance of American Air Power." Washington (DC), Potomac Books.

PARET, Peter, 1976, "Clausewitz and the State." Oxford, Clarendon.

SAMUELS, Martin, 1995, "Command or Control? Command, Training and Tactics in the British and German Armies, 1888-1918." London, Frank Cass.

SCHURMAN, Donald M., 1965, "The Education of a Navy. The development of British naval strategic thought, 1867-1914." London, Cassell.

SCHURMAN, Donald M., 1981, "Julian S. Corbett 1954-1922. Historian of British Maritime Policy from Drake to Jellicoe." London, Royal Historical Society.

STRACHAN, Hew, 2007, "Clausewitz's On War. A Biography." London, Atlantic Press.

WARDEN III, John A., 2000, "The Air Campaign. Revised Edition." San Jose, toExcel.

WATTS, Barry D., 2001, "The Foundations of U.S. Air Doctrine. The Problem of Friction." Washington (DC), Government Reprints Press.

WEIGLEY, Russell F., 1973, "The American Way of War. A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy." Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

WHITE, Charles Edward White, 1989, "The Enlightened Soldier. Scharnhorst and the Militärische Gesellschaft in Berlin, 1801-1805." Westport, Connecticut, Praeger.