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The British Army in the Second World War – Past, Present & Future

Professor Gary Sheffield, University of Birmingham

Report by Andy Grainger

Having looked at the British Army in both 1918 and 1939/45 Gary confessed to a sense of *déjà vu*. In both eras the Army initially attracted a bad press but now a number of revisionist historians were coming along and their research has produced a more nuanced view. This paper looks at the army of the past, the present state of historiography and possible avenues for future research

The public perception of the Army of the First World War is (still) of an Army led by Donkeys. The Army of the Second World War is not seen like that. The public see the Army as having won the war and the identification of generals such as Monty and Slim with it and with the victories of 1944 and 1945 has contributed to this view.

Criticisms of the army have therefore come from different sources – journalists and popular historians from as far back as Chester Wilmot in the 1950s to Carlo d'Este and Max Hastings in the 1980s.

Whereas in the First World War there was one primary front, in France and Flanders, this was not true of the Army of 1939-45. Armies on different fronts evolved different doctrines and there were some difficulties in transferring 'lessons learned' from theatre to theatre.

Our image of the 1918 Army is of the Tommy, the infantryman. The image of the army of the Second World is very different: paratroops, commandos and tanks in the desert gives a very different picture. The reality of infantry fighting in places like Anzio or the Normandy bocage does not feature so heavily in the public perception.

The Army's fortunes were more varied too. There were strategic defeats in the First World War like Gallipoli or Kut but nothing as serious as Dunkirk, or Singapore. Thus there was criticism of the Army in the 1940s even while the war was going on; criticism of Haig and his generals during the First War was much more muted.

In the Second World War lots of questions were asked about the disasters such as Norway and Dunkirk but also about the morale of the soldier. The saying 'Tommy is no Soldier' had no counterpart in the contemporary public perception of Bomber or Fighter Command.

In the Second World War, as in the First, the 'British' Army was an imperial coalition. Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians Indians, South Africans and many others all played a role in the Second War possibly even more significant than the First. But this paper will only consider the British Army.



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Gary then looked briefly at three strands in the historiography of the criticisms of the British army.

- Class Warriors
- High Command
- The Americans

Guilty Men a book ghosted by four Beaverbook journalists under the name of ‘Cato’ was published only a few weeks after Dunkirk. It rehashed a version of the ‘Lions led by Donkeys’ theory by identifying a list of weak politicians had starved the army of resources in the years leading up to war.

Further, George Orwell picked up the idea of Blimpishness, that the Army was old-fashioned, not used to the new warfare and drew parallels with wider British society.

Whether any of this was true or not, it did strike a chord at the time. The film *The Way Ahead* which came out in 1944 although it depicted events in Operation Torch did try to show that the Army had changed. The platoon, for example, was led by a former garage mechanic, albeit one played by David Niven.

Churchill was very critical of the Army. Brooke had to fend off the criticisms about poor generals but privately he shared some of Churchill’s concerns.

Some American commanders, such as Patton, were very critical of the British approach, which they saw as sluggish and risk-averse. Others, like J Lawton Collins, were more understanding of the legacy of the First War.

After the war popular culture, films and so on tended to portray the army in a positive light. This was at variance with some of the middlebrow writing, however.

The Struggle for Europe by the Australian journalist Chester Wilmot contained many criticisms of the British Army including the failure of 3rd Division to take Caen on D-Day. Liddell Hart’s writings tended to be critical of the Army in the Second War.

Until recently our views have been shaped by the memoirs of generals and others who were participants in the action.

Churchill’s memoirs were sometimes critical and Brooke responded by publishing a version of his diaries edited by Arthur Bryant in the early 1950s. Slim’s memoir *Defeat into Victory* which concerned his time as leader of the 14th Army made a big impact and indeed we still tend to see the Burma campaign on Slim’s terms.

Monty’s memoirs appeared slightly later, were very controversial and upset a range of people including Auchinleck and Eisenhower. Even today it is difficult to discuss the Army other than in terms of Monty’s influence upon it.



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Montgomery's *Memoirs* (1958) produced a reaction. Corelli Barnett's *The Desert Generals* (1960) was the first British book to succeed in pricking the bubble of Montgomery's reputation and caused outrage. Nigel Hamilton's 3 volume biography of Monty of the 1980s was in turn a reaction to this but was criticized as being overly favourable to Montgomery.

Turning now to look at other records. The Official Histories are very patchy. For example, Ellis's volume on Normandy is very light on tactical detail. The Official Histories have had very little impact in popular culture and are less useful for historians so they have not made as much impact as Edmonds did after the First War.

On the other hand, lots of memoirs were written in the 1950s and 1960s.

There were also a great many popular histories in the 1970s by authors such as Cornelius Ryan, Alexander McKee and Max Hastings. These were not truly scholarly books but were well written and had some good insights. Other authors developed this work further – particularly noteworthy examples are Michael Carver's *Dilemmas of the Desert War* and the works of Ronald Lewin.

There was very little scholarly coverage until the 1970s. Brian Bond's treatment of Pownall's diaries was an exception but there has been a scholarly revolution from the 1990s. This might be dated from the publication in 1997 of *A Time to Kill, the Soldier's Experience of War in the West 1939-1945* edited by Paul Addison and Angus Calder, following a conference at the University of Edinburgh in 1995.

In recent years there have been some particularly significant works on the British Army including *Raising Churchill's Army* by David French, *Colossal Cracks* by Stephen Hart, *British Armour in the Normandy Campaign* by John Buckley and Niall Barr's comprehensive book *Pendulum of War: The Three Battles of El Alamein*.

British culture contains strong views of the Second World War; indeed it might be said to represent the foundation myth of modern Britain. It is seen as Britain's Finest Hour and TV programmes such as *Dad's Army* treat it with nostalgia. As we are seeing in this Conference, life was very different in countries that were occupied but this treatment in British culture excludes much of the experience of the combatant or even the experiences of participants scattered across the globe.

We have the image of Spitfire pilots, the successors to the aces of the First War, jousting like modern knights of the air with sleek fighter planes and radar but in a clean, modern style of warfare. There is the story of the firemen and the Blitz but not very much about gritty infantry fighting in Cassino or Normandy.

The Army lost 264,000 men in the Second World War, far fewer than the 760,000 of the First War and the smaller army fought smaller battles. There was more advanced technology in the Second War and many more people served in the logistical tail but for the infantry, life was statistically more dangerous in 1944 than it was in 1918.



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On the other hand, Second War soldiers had the perception that the experiences of their fathers had been far worse than theirs so that however bad it might be, their lot was easier. But in any event popular culture retains an image of freewheeling tank fighting in the desert and landing craft hitting the beaches on D-Day rather than the ten weeks of bocage fighting that followed it.

The North West Europe campaign of 1944-45 was much shorter than that on the Western Front from 1914-18 but some memoirs have appeared to put across the combatant's view. Alex Bowlby and Spike Milligan both served in North Africa and the Mediterranean and though there is some humour in the latter life comes across as pretty grim.

So as film is concerned, there has been nothing like *Saving Private Ryan*; the experience of the British has been bowdlerized.

On the other hand, the image of the general in the Second War was very different from that of the First. Slim, Montgomery, Leese and the others all consciously rejected 'chateaux generalship' and visited their soldiers in a manner similar to politicians electioneering.

In the future we may expect a lot of discussion about how the Army learned (or did not learn) lessons. Terry Copp and Stephen Hart take a different view from Carlo d'Este and Max Hastings. Niall Barr's book explained how the 8th Army worked at El Alamein. It was highly trained by the end of the North African campaign but much was lost when it was split up before the invasion of Sicily.

There is a lot to be done in terms of looking at its place in society, morale and discipline and comparative studies with other imperial contingents, the Americans and the Germans. Roughly 50% of Montgomery's forces at Alamein were not British.

The British Army from 1939 to 1945 was less robust, had less depth and there was a serious manpower problem in 1944. There are fewer cultural resonances than in 1918 but there are still questions as to whether its fighting performance really was as poor as some historians have suggested in recent years. The evidence would suggest that it was not.

Questions

The following points came up during questions:

The German occupation of the Channel Islands does not form part of the national myth. Also excluded are accounts of mass panic in cities and the booing of the King and Churchill in the East End.