

THE ART OF JUDGING FOREIGN NATIONS

BY GENERAL VON FREYTAG-LORINGHOVEN

[The author of this article, who is a retired general of infantry, points out some instances in which the German authorities misjudged other nations both before and during the war, but defends the German General Staff against the oft-repeated charge that it grossly miscalculated many factors of high military importance.]

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LEROY-BEAULIEU, in his well-known book, entitled *The Country of the Tsar and the Russians*, emphasizes the desirability of understanding foreign nations. He turns to the French of 1871 with the words:—

If we had known how much harshness and asperity, but at the same time how much firmness and decision the German people possessed; how much hidden cupidity and at the same time how much practical sense they had; how much order and discipline there existed in this nation—if we had known all this, we should never have opposed its unification, thus incurring its swift vengeance.

Now no one will deny that the understanding of other nations is a prime necessity. But the acquisition of a correct understanding is exceedingly difficult. Even a keen man's opinions about his fellow men are only partially accurate. His mental picture of his neighbor corresponds only in part to the real person. At bottom, indeed, how little we know ourselves! The literature of autobiography is a sufficient proof of that.

How much less reliable, then, must be our judgment of a whole nation, especially a foreign one! The war was full of surprises in this field; our own people surprised us, at first agreeably, then unpleasantly. Our ally was no

less disconcerting. We had expected from Austria a greater display of fortitude, although it must be admitted that, on the whole, the old Empire did resist the stress of the World War surprisingly well. Undoubtedly, we deceived ourselves about our adversaries, just as they deceived themselves about us. Never had they anticipated such a display of strength on our part. Their inordinate demands are now based in part on this recollection of our power; they disregard the fact that we no longer have the capacity that we had before the war.

Our diplomats are charged with having misjudged foreign peoples. In many cases they undoubtedly deserve this reproach; but it must not be forgotten that in this task the diplomatic profession has nowadays to face greater difficulties than in the old days. The sources for the study of foreign countries are more abundant than ever, to be sure, and one can learn much from the foreign press; but the territory which must be covered has enormously increased. It used to be enough if the representative at a foreign capital kept in close touch with a limited number of statesmen and members of the court. Nowadays he must keep his finger on the pulse of the whole nation. It has been said that foreigners, after spending one year in Japan, are apt to believe

that they have acquired a fair knowledge of the country; but that after ten years they become aware of knowing next to nothing about it. The same thing is true to a greater or less degree of all peoples, Europeans included.

It is, therefore, unfair to berate our General Staff for having misjudged the enemy. Its opinions proved in the main correct, except as regards imponderable forces. Our enemies, it appears, made more serious miscalculations than we did. We now know, from the publications of Pierrefonds, with what exaggerated optimism the French General Staff often viewed the situation. England's confidence in the safety of her commerce was wholly at variance with the facts, as can be seen by consulting the writings of Archibald Hurd. Lord Grey's remark, that England would hardly risk more by participating in the war than by staying out, shows how completely he deceived himself. Let us refrain, therefore, from railing at our General Staff. Grumblers should realize that war, like every other great enterprise, even enterprises in commerce or industry, demands a certain optimism, though it should always be tempered by careful calculation. Frederick the Great possessed this optimism in a high degree. While pressed most severely during the Seven Years' War he persisted in hoping for aid from the Turks. The French were manifestly enabled by their lightheartedness to carry on; the matter-of-fact German saw all things with their shadows around them.

Hermann Stegemann says, in his history of the war:—

Nothing is more absurd than to deny the fortitude of the French. They have proved, in all the victories and defeats of their rich and varied military history, that, in addition to their proverbial *élan* in attack, they display pertinacity in defense. The Frenchman's well-developed imagination and high

spirits help him to see even unfavorable circumstances in a favorable light, and to bear them with grim determination so long as he retains a firm confidence in his leaders.

This is in the main correct, although one must remember that the French army was seriously demoralized by the German blows at the beginning of the war, until the miracle of the Marne restored its confidence and courage. The German General Staff was far less deceived about French powers of endurance than is popularly believed in our country.

Notwithstanding our far-famed thoroughness, we Germans easily form a superficial judgment concerning individuals or nations, because we always read our own traits into them. From time immemorial the German has valued foreign things highly and set them above his own; but his theoretical mind inclines him to invest the foreigner with figments of his own imagination. Our inability to understand others intuitively and clearly did us much harm during the war, alike in contacts with our allies and with the enemy.

So far as the French are concerned, certain historical events have blinded the Germans to the facts. Thus we failed to realize that the French nation, in spite of its revolutions and endless emphasis upon 'freedom,' has always maintained a strong leaning toward authority. That explains why a dominating will such as Clemenceau's could impose itself upon the country and overcome the undeniable war-weariness of 1917:

Another historical trait of the French, which the simple Germans forgot in the course of the centuries, is their innate cruelty. Ludwig Häusser in his *History of the Age of the Reformation*, very justly remarks concerning the Huguenot wars:—

It would seem to me as if there is hidden in the French a certain ferocity which, when it has once broken out of bounds, shows itself in excesses that are not usually indulged in by civilized nations. It appears in the religious wars as it did later in the Revolution of 1789. Other nations have experienced the horrors of religious and civil wars; but history affords no example of the refinements of cruelty practised by the French in 1793.

The distinguished Frenchman, de Tocqueville, writes in his well-known book, *The Old Régime and the Revolution*: — ‘The French are the mildest and most kindly people in the world so long as their tranquillity is not disturbed, but the most barbaric of all, as soon as they are swayed by violent passions.’ Side by side with good and great qualities, one finds in them lower traits. Thus, the French soldiers — and not the colored troops alone — demonstrated, in addition to their heroic courage, the capacity to play the part of *nettoyeur* in captured German trenches. Their treatment of German prisoners demonstrated a nature that did not differentiate them from Apaches. Their officers were completely devoid of that chivalric spirit to which a Frenchman of the old school gave expression in 1870 when he said, ‘The person of a prisoner of war is sacred.’ White and black Frenchmen, and women as well, have not hesitated to mock and maltreat our prisoners; the Government itself set an example of maltreatment.

The French have always had a talent for warfare; universal military training in times of peace developed their military qualities and spread the spirit of discipline through the nation, besides affording an appropriate expression for their strong consciousness of national unity. Anyone who judged the French people and their army by earlier standards was necessarily surprised by their achievements during the war.

The outstanding trait of the Britisher, his dogged perseverance, was too well known to have been seriously underestimated, although it was of course impossible to foretell how this trait would display itself in the course of the war. Above all things, it is unreasonable to reproach us for not having reckoned with the possibility of a huge British army raised by conscription. How could we possibly have foreseen that the avowedly conservative Englishman would pocket his deep-seated prejudice against this institution, and completely break with his national traditions — as he did? That it so happened speaks volumes for the sound political instinct of these people.

Other British traits were not sufficiently taken into consideration on our side, in spite of the fact that the history of this world-empire gives abundant evidence of their existence. We set far too much value upon British sincerity. Recent publications make clear how we were deceived, again and again, by the unctuous words of the English. The characteristic ‘cant’ of the Briton was not given its proper rating. In any event, the lessons which history teaches us about other nations can only be applied with reservations, as is demonstrated by Britain’s course in this war; for she suddenly abandoned her traditions and became a great military power.

The much vaunted perseverance of the English has not been at all times equally manifest. In the wars with the first French Republic and with the First Empire, the doggedness of England presented, on the whole, an impressive spectacle. Studied in detail, however, it displayed during this long-drawn-out struggle many spasms of hesitation and weakness. Nothing but confidence in their unconquered seapower inspired the English to keep on. Nelson gave expression to this truth

when he wrote, in September 1804: 'If our islands in the West Indies should fall, England would seek peace with so faint a heart that it would be humiliating?' After all, it was not preposterous to expect that England, during the World War, might be brought to terms by the pressure of economic interests. Indeed, she came very near asking for peace during the summer of 1917, before she found effective means of dealing with the activities of our submarines.

The support of America, and the community of interests which linked the Anglo-Saxon nations even before America's entry into the war, made it possible for England and for the other Entente countries to continue the struggle. Those of us in Germany who placed confidence in the strict neutrality of America, and who expected the Germans in America to influence the policy of the United States, were bitterly disappointed. An accurate appraisal of America's temper, and a realization of the activity with which English propaganda had been carried on for years before the war, would have saved us from this pitfall. This mistake, however, cannot justly be laid at the doors of our General Staff. In the spring of 1918, our military leaders were not deceived concerning the strength of the American forces on French soil. Foch himself, at the beginning of March, 1918, set the estimate at about 300,000 men, the majority of whom were still in process of training. The heaviest troop-shipments did not start until April. Even though these troops were hastily trained, they weighed heavily in the balance at a time when the armies of both Germany and the Entente were hard pressed for reserves.

Our estimate of the Russians as soldiers proved to be most accurate. Their masses of troops, as we had anti-

cipated, proved to be so unwieldy that the greater mobility of our forces, combined with their unshakable steadfastness, served to counterbalance superiority in numbers. But we failed to reckon sufficiently with the fact that Russia, by taking prompt measures, could place her troops in action far more speedily than would ordinarily be deemed possible in such a vast country. It was not that our General Staff failed to grasp the mobilizing capacities of our eastern neighbor, but it evidently did not take the political factors sufficiently into account. When we failed to achieve an understanding with either England or Russia our politics encountered an *impasse*, and for the moment we seemed oblivious to the magnitude of the danger. Moreover, we were not fully aware of the great strides that Pan Slavism had made in Russia. It bent the feeble Tsar to its will, and not only captivated the masses of the people, but held them in its grasp for the first three years of the war. Petrograd could not fathom the political currents of this vast country, and was entirely incapable of directing them. The era in which a Bismarck, through his influence at the Russian Imperial Court, could exert an influence upon Russian politics — that era was gone.

Among our enemies, and those of Austria, none but Italy and Rumania provided an agreeable surprise. Despite the bravery displayed by some units, their armies as a whole proved to be less formidable than might have been expected. As for the Poles, they were an unpleasant eye-opener to us. Having known large numbers of these people at close range in the Polish districts of Prussia, we should have known them and their antecedents perfectly; we should have known what to expect from this undependable, faithless, unbalanced nation, and should not have

counted upon any service from them out of gratitude for their liberation from Russia and Russian militarism. In this instance the honorable but highly unpolitic habit of the Germans, which makes them attribute to other people their own standards of duty and obligation, did us a bad turn, and one for which we are now paying the penalty. We should have known — yes, must have known — that the heart of Poland throbbed for France and for the Entente; that the innate aversion of the Poles to all things German was far stronger than their hatred of the Muscovite. Instead of trusting these people, we should have been prepared for the worst from them. This was one of our worst blunders.

In time of war, individuals and whole nations show themselves for what they are. This was particularly true of the war we have just passed through, a conflict in which nearly all European nations were engaged. Many a lesson can be taken to heart from it. Unhappily, a great many of them have been already forgotten. All too soon we are dreaming of a reconciliation of nations, in spite of obvious indications to the contrary. We are closing our eyes to the fact that this war, and its aftermath, simply afford new proof that old Ranke was absolutely right when he expressed the hope that no prince, in creating a state, should ever imagine that he could profit aught from something not gained by his own efforts.'

THE NATURE OF CHINESE CIVILIZATION

BY CHEN CHIA-YI

[The Chinese fortnightly, Tung Fan Cha Chi, is liberal in tone and has always been distinguished by its efforts to familiarize its readers with foreign thought. In its earlier days it printed a great many translations from European languages, especially novels; but at present all its articles are entirely original. Great emphasis is laid on new theories in art, literature, and the current schools of philosophic thought.]

From *Tung Fan Cha Chi* (Eastern Miscellany)
(CHINESE LIBERAL FORTNIGHTLY)

THE overwhelming influence of new ideas upon us since the establishment of the Republic has been a most unusual phenomenon. New currents of thought are flowing in, in rapid succession, and the people have been so attracted by their novelty and strangeness that the weaker-minded have come ultimately to regard their own national heritage with a somewhat suspicious eye.

They have written on numerous topics. They have discussed the relations between our national ideals and what they call the scientific spirit; they have given us an economic interpretation of Chinese thought, exposed the fallacy of our philosophy of life, and made an analysis of the two civilizations, the Western and the Eastern, much to the latter's disadvantage. Many went so far as to assert that,