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America's World War II Leaders in Europe: Some Thoughts

MARTIN BLUMENSON

Our heroes in World War II are dear to us. We cherish them, applaud their exertions during the conflict, and feel lucky to have had such capable and sterling men leading our troops in battle. They brought us victory, performed their duties with conspicuous success, exhibited personal traits conforming to our expectations, became well and widely known, and took their places modestly in the pantheon of our military giants.

As a recent article makes plain, our World War II commanders, particularly those on the higher levels, had an abundance of "professional skills and abilities" learned along career paths preparing them well for their "successful performance of duty." The assumption throughout reflects the widespread belief in how superb their qualifications for war leadership were. Their aptitudes, both natural and acquired, enabled them to respond effectively to the challenges of the war in their time.[1]

Apparently, they were our brightest and our best. The system uncovering them and inserting them into their proper places appeared to work well. Until recently, no one has questioned the abilities of our high-ranking officers except to quibble over a few details, all essentially minor—lapses in judgment, errors in method, and the like.[2] It is difficult, almost un-American, even to raise the issue of their overall excellence because they are so likable, so admirable in our collective memories. They have become bright stars unalterably fixed in our military firmament.

Furthermore, they were the only leaders we had in the struggle. We had no others. To whom can we compare them and their performance? To rate them against leaders of our allies or of our enemies makes little sense, for the

historical and cultural differences are too great to permit reasonable matching. We are consequently stuck with the group who gained fame and our lasting gratitude. Upon reflection, it is not a bad group to be stuck with.

Yet the record of accomplishment—and I speak only of the European side of the war—is essentially bland and plodding. The commanders were generally workmanlike rather than bold, prudent rather than daring, George S. Patton, Jr., being of course a notable exception. They showed a decided tendency to stay within the odds, the safe way of operating, and refrained from opting for the imaginative and the unexpected. Very few of their operations were brilliant. Those that stand out—among them the thrusts to Palermo and Messina in Sicily, the breakout across France, the rescue at Bastogne—are exceptions to the rule, all too rare. The achievements can usually be traced to a single actor.

Our leaders, in addition, displayed serious flaws in conception and execution, as at Anzio, in the Hürtgen Forest, and during the reduction of the Bulge. The pattern emerged very early in the war at the battle of Kasserine Pass, the first hostile meeting between American and German ground troops. The confrontation was a disaster for us. The defeat was bad enough. What was worse was the shocking revelation of how ill-prepared our leaders were for combat and how poorly our system for producing war leaders had functioned.

To a large extent, personal deficiencies by commanders up and down the chain of command created the Kasserine setback. Far too many officers failed to realize that the time-and-space factors prevalent in World War I were now outmoded and irrelevant. They had no idea until too late of the accelerated reaction time and the extended battlefield space in effect in the 1940s. They were thus unable to adapt and adjust to the new requirements of leadership.

Who was responsible for putting this kind of officer into leadership positions? The military were not altogether at fault for the command deficiencies displayed during the actions around Kasserine Pass. Two factors in their defense come quickly to mind. First, the US Army started far too late to prepare seriously for World War II. As a result, the training program, the procurement of weapons, and virtually all else were hasty, largely improvised, almost chaotic, and painfully inadequate throughout the intensely short period

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of mobilization and organization immediately before and after Pearl Harbor, that is, before the battlefield commitment of units.[3] The military had repeatedly informed the political authorities of the needs for growth and modernization and had just as repeatedly requested funds to initiate the twin process. The villain in the case, accountable for our unpreparedness, was American society. The American people counted on the false security offered by the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and preferred to dream of the low costs of isolationism. The Army suffered.[4]

Second, the comparatively easy sledding of the Army prior to Kasserine deferred the moment when it would finally have to winnow out the ineffective leaders. The combat around Kasserine Pass, like all the initial and early battles of our wars, proved out the real leaders and shook out the duds. The actuality itself, it is often said, determines who is suited to lead in combat and who is not. Furthermore, it is strongly asserted, there is no sure way of telling beforehand, that is, in advance of the experience, who is temperamentally fitted to lead men and who is going to fall apart at the sound of the guns. If pushed too far, however, such claims begin to sound like a cop-out and an excuse. The primary function of the professional military body between wars is to produce wartime leaders. The process of correctly bringing up officers and grooming them at every stage of their careers is supposed not only to turn up and push ahead the qualified but also to weed out the incapable. The system works overtly by promoting certain officers and by refusing promotion to others.

The selection of an officer for advancement in the Army actually fulfills two requirements. He is thereby deemed ready and able to discharge increased authority and responsibility in his duties. He is also regarded as possessing the personal characteristics cherished and sought in the profession of arms. Those who do the judging are the high-ranking leaders in the profession. They renew and perpetuate the professional body as well as its standards. They do so by choosing certain members for professional leadership in the present and also for the future. The unspoken and possibly unconscious wish of those, the existing leadership, who are doing the selecting is quite naturally to find their eventual replacements among those who most thoroughly resemble themselves. It follows, then, that a professional group of any sort in any society reflects the strengths and weaknesses of those who are at the head of it at any given time. Those who shape the continuities of a profession do so in their own image.

A healthy professional group seeks and chooses those who meet the best and most relevant criteria. Officers being judged try to show in the course of their careers attention to duty, serious study, dedication, hard work, a good mind, and other virtues—all in order to guarantee advancement, increasing responsibility, and eventual success, the last measured by the attainment of high rank and a proficient performance. The brightest and the best are thus

rewarded. But perhaps, like all conventional wisdom, this conclusion is altogether too neat.

We were fortunate to have George C. Marshall as the US Army Chief of Staff throughout World War II. His contributions to victory were legion, far too numerous to begin to mention here. His intellect, rectitude, and vision were beyond compare. One of his most significant activities was to institute a virtual one-man effort to find proper officers for our rapidly expanding war machine. Throughout his term of office as the top Army man in uniform, Marshall called upon those officers he had known during his years of service who had impressed him with their dedication and efficiency. He had, it seems, entered into his personal black notebook the names of those whom he had judged to be fit for eventual high command. These officers became Marshall's protégés, and they received choice assignments as well as concomitant advancement during the war.

Particularly lucky were those who had been with Marshall at the Infantry School at Fort Benning between 1927 and 1932, when he was Assistant Commandant. Outstanding students and faculty members were especially well-regarded and in his good graces. They had proved their potential for heavy responsibility, and Marshall looked after them during the war. They were generally excellent in discharging their duties, and they flourished and rose in rank and in authority.

Mark Clark missed Marshall at Fort Benning, but became acquainted with him at Fort Lewis, Washington. Clark was the 3d Division G-3 while Marshall commanded a brigade in the division. Their duties brought them together, and they worked closely with each other on training exercises and maneuvers. Marshall was impressed with Clark's abilities, and, as a consequence, Clark's standing in the profession rose like a rocket.

George S. Patton, Jr., a cavalryman, had no chance of meeting Marshall at the Infantry School, but he had already made the most of his contact with the future Chief of Staff during World War I. Both officers were closely associated with John J. Pershing. Both lectured at the Staff College established by Pershing at Langres in France. Patton too became a Marshall man, and he benefited from Marshall's interest and confidence in him.

The Marshall method of identifying and rewarding first-rate officers was a system within a system. It worked well so far as it went. For every person entered in Marshall's notebook, there were probably a dozen, perhaps more, who were every bit as good as the ones he listed. The others were simply unfortunate because they had failed to come within Marshall's orbit and ken. If Marshall did not know them, he could not write their names into his book. How many excellent individuals were slighted simply because of their bad luck of never meeting or working with Marshall is, of course, a matter of conjecture.

Marshall also made mistakes. Some of his choices failed to measure up to the demands of combat. Lloyd Fredendall, Ernest Dawley, and John Millikin, all three corps commanders, were Marshall's selections. All were relieved of command, the first in North Africa after Kasserine Pass, the second in Italy after the Salerno invasion, the third after the Rhine River crossing at Remagen. It was rather late and rather shocking to discover officers nurtured in the system and advanced with every expectation of success to be found deficient at so high a level of command. There were other mistakes. For years Marshall confused James Van Fleet, an outstanding soldier, with someone who had a similar name and was a well-known drunk. Van Fleet's career progression suffered until the error somehow came to Marshall's attention.

The active-duty career of Marshall himself came very close to being terminated before his appointment as Chief of Staff. If he had been retired before gaining the post, as almost came to pass, what would have happened to the exceptional Marshall men whom he had personally and idiosyncratically chosen for leadership roles? Most likely, some of our heroes of World War II would have had different names.

The Army as an institution traditionally carried the burden of selecting officers for advancement through the more systematic individual ratings of the periodic efficiency reports, usually submitted once a year, sometimes more often. The criteria by which superiors judged subordinates directly under them were revised from time to time during the interwar years, along with the format, to indicate more accurately and clearly the extent to which the subjects showed the desirable professional qualities. The reporting was not always entirely objective, but the cumulative papers in an officer's personal record file characterized with good accuracy his professional progress over the years.

Young officers wishing promotion had to be, first of all, ambitious. No other profession is more competitive, and no other so closely regulates the behavior of its members. Officers without ambition lack drive, and those who refuse to push rarely get ahead. It was ever so in the 1920s and 1930s, as it is today. Secondly, officers wanting advancement had to demonstrate their devotion to the service as well as their efficiency in meeting its demands. They had to be outstanding in their professional attainments and practices, and they needed to fulfill their duties with precision and élan. Finally, they had to have the knack of attracting the favorable notice of their superiors. To be excellent in duty was simply not enough. To be excellent and unremarked was worse than useless. The goal was to be outstanding and to be so noted by someone important, by someone who could enhance a junior's career strivings.

George S. Patton, Jr., then a young second lieutenant, in explaining to his skeptical father-in-law why he was participating so single-mindedly in horse races, horse shows, and polo matches, said, "What I am doing looks like

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General of the Army George C. Marshall; Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark, commander of the 15th Army Group; and Lieutenant General Joseph McNarney, Deputy Supreme Allied Commander, Mediterranean Theater, salute during a ceremony in Florence, Italy, on 11 February 1945.

play to you but in my business it is the best sort of advertising. It makes people talk and that is a sign they are noticing. And . . . the notice of others has been the start of many successful men."[5] He was, of course, referring to efforts to draw attention to himself, to his bearing, dress, and soldierly aptitudes, and also to make his name well-known throughout the Army.

Throughout his long and distinguished career, Patton tried always to impress his superiors with his professional excellence. This took two forms. He endeavored to do in an outstanding manner more than was expected or required in his assigned duties and in those ancillary pursuits, like polo and other athletic engagements, that were closely allied to official Army service. He also practiced an outrageous flattery of those who could help him get ahead. In addition to his real soldierly achievements, he was a bootlicker par excellence. Perhaps he could get away with the flattery because his military professionalism was so obvious. Or were his superiors of that period so susceptible to blandishment?

Aside from the traditional efficiency reports already alluded to, two main methods of identifying and developing talent existed between the wars. One was the sponsorship exercised by mentors. A senior officer took several promising junior officers under his wing, looked after them, helped them get

into service schools, and sought to land them choice assignments leading to future advancement. The second way was through attendance at the various Army schools. Successful officers usually proceeded through a progression of educational institutions. First came the Military Academy at West Point or college work with the ROTC, both leading to a commission. Then arrived the advance branch schooling at Fort Benning for Infantry, Fort Sill for Artillery, Fort Belvoir for the Engineers, and the like. Next came the course variously titled but eventually called the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, which was regarded generally as the most important school assignment for all officers, the prerequisite, it was said, for promotion to high rank and major responsibility. Finally, the top of the educational pile was the Army War College.

How rich the substance of the learning was, how solid the instruction and pedagogy were, how stimulating the intellectual impact was, and how relevant the performance ratings at school were to future assignment—all these matters are still under rather intense discussion and disagreement among historians, soldiers, and educators. Most observers are in accord on one thing. The most noteworthy aspect of Leavenworth and its "school solution" type of teaching was the imposition of a homogenized view on the students. Graduates had a common method of approaching and solving military problems and, as a consequence, were comfortable and at home in any headquarters where they might be assigned.

The behavior in class of John Shirley Wood may be significant. Probably the most intelligent of all the armor disciples, Wood trained the 4th Armored Division to its high pitch of combat proficiency, then led it in combat

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John Shirley Wood, one of the Army's intellectuals, was nicknamed "P" for professor. He trained the 4th Armored Division to fighting trim, then led it in combat just as skillfully.

with distinction in Normandy. Wood was older and thought to be smarter than most of his contemporaries. His nickname was "P" for professor, attributable to the many hours he spent helping classmates in their studies. Wood was reported to have expressed his disdain for the intellectual content of the Leavenworth course by ostentatiously reading a newspaper while his instructors lectured.

Thus the problem of the Army in World War II is largely the problem of the Army between the World Wars. Our Army during that period, apart from the frenzied preparations in 1940 and 1941, was a provincial, somewhat backward society in the process of dozing. The working day was short, nothing much of consequence was happening, and the procedures were cut and dried. Such complacency was bound to have adverse effects when war finally came. Today's somewhat exaggerated view of our World War II leaders' martial prowess is probably the product of national pride and the warm glow of nostalgia—after all, we *did* win the war.

Many observers and historians have noted how "impotent" and "ineffective" the Army was in the prewar days.[6] Low pay and endless routine produced stagnation and futility. In these conditions, how well did the traditional means of identifying and developing talent function? If the context and framework of the Army provided little stimulus to learning, how did bright, ambitious, and dedicated officers prepare for what they all called "the next war"?

George Patton grew professionally through his reading, a "monumental self-study he charted for himself."[7] He was hardly alone. Quite a few officers who strove for knowledge and development gained professional competence by more or less systematic reading. They also interacted with like-minded officers of their generation, all "intelligent, stimulating men . . . studying their profession" individually and in small groups, off duty and at the service schools.[8]

It is sometimes said that the most productive function of the military school system was to gather together the most ambitious and successful officers for specific periods of time, the school term, thereby enabling them to be mentally stimulated through mutual discussions and bull sessions. Men of native intelligence thus overcame the handicaps and restrictions of a moribund military organization. They read, discussed, and, in some cases, responded to the challenge of writing articles and studies, thereby becoming the top-notch professionals we needed in the Second World War. This is the legend. And it may well be true. By compelling the brightest members to look beyond the Army's formal academic offerings, the Army forced them to learn on their own, which may have enhanced initiative and resourcefulness. Self-preparation was perhaps the key to later success.

How stifling was the prewar Army? Carson McCullers opened a novel, published in 1941 at the end of what were often called the Army's "lean

years," with these lines: "An Army post in peacetime is a dull place. Things happen, but then they happen over and over again." After using the word "monotony" and the term "rigid pattern" to describe military life, McCullers continued: "Perhaps the dullness of a post is caused most of all by insularity and by a surfeit of leisure and safety, for once a man enters the Army he is expected only to follow the heels ahead of him."[9]

If the description is entirely accurate, it is chilling. Was the prewar Army environment really as deadly as all that? If so, how could anyone, especially the leaders in World War II, have stayed and endured the boredom? Some officers had entered the Army during the Spanish-American War and during World War I, and they simply remained, perhaps mainly out of inertia and regard for the steady pay. The Great Depression of the 1930s lends credibility to this notion. Others stayed because they enjoyed the satisfactions of horses and polo or of regular routine. Still others were in uniform because they were disenchanted with and renounced civilian life.[10]

A few, perhaps many, ascribed their choice to continue in the service as motivated by the hope of commanding troops in war. They stayed despite the tide of civilian indifference to military preparedness. Noel F. Parrish, a cavalry trooper, later a flying officer, expressed the sentiment as follows:

> Ground and air officers alike stubbornly carried out their duties among a people hoping and trying to believe that all officers were as useless as their saber chains. It was a weird, almost furtive existence, like that of fireman trying to guard a wooden city whose occupants pretended it was fireproof. In such an atmosphere of unreality, officers sometimes felt a little ghostly and bewildered, and turned to the affectation of imported uniforms and mannerisms, the imitation of the well-to-do and horse culture. These psychic manifestations of a sense of social uselessness appeared in a surprisingly small number of officers. Most plodded grimly along, stubbornly reminding themselves and each other that they were real, after all, and that the things they were doing were necessary.[11]

What they were doing was not only necessary but, above all, important, certainly in the light of another world war looming on the horizon.

Herman Wouk made the same point in *The Caine Mutiny*. The regular officers, he said, who persevered during the bad times and kept the military alive made it possible for the services to rise from their ashes, regain their vitality, and perform in exemplary fashion and triumphantly in World War II.[12] The feelings put into words by Parrish and Wouk are thrilling. Unfortunately, they were postwar observations rather than bona fide observations of the prewar years. They seem to be rationalizations or justifications instead of accurate depictions of the times.

Lucian K. Truscott, Jr., who was one of our best commanders in World War II, has authentically depicted how the older Army lived.[13] His account

reveals as well how happy and well-adjusted Truscott himself was in the regimen. What would have been stultifying to some was evidently close to perfect for him. He enjoyed his service. His prior experience was as a young public school teacher in rural and primitive areas; the life was hard and the pay was erratic. In contrast, the Army offered all sorts of unexpected pleasures, steady employment, periodic travel, endlessly fascinating tours of duty, the joys of riding horses and playing polo, and the opportunity to meet lots of people in the service. If most of his contemporaries were very much the same as he, several were out of the ordinary, such as a talented pianist and a gifted linguistics expert. In addition, before World War II every outfit seemed to have its resident eccentric, a harmless individual who added salt and pepper to what was otherwise a diet of rather bland existence.

Many officers during the interwar years had offers of good jobs in civilian life, paying much more than what they earned in the military. Some, of course, inevitably left the service, but the majority refused to succumb to such temptation. Many of the latter rose to prominence and became well known in World War II. Their reasons for declining civilian employment were never terribly explicit. They were much like that of William H. Simpson, later the Ninth Army commander in Europe: "I said to hell with it. I am going to stay in the Army."[14]

Part of the failure to search for and elucidate the reasons for preferring Army life over civilian pursuits was in the nature of the officers themselves. Many were reticent, few articulate. Many wanted to appear less than thoughtful and expressive. Much of their motivation needed no expression. The military ethos was so ingrained and so strong among much of the officer corps that it required no definition. No one found it necessary to explain, for example, what the West Point motto—Duty, Honor, Country—meant. Everyone simply knew.

Whether they understood it on a conscious level or not, officers belonged to the aristocracy by virtue of their service. Harking back to medieval times, when only members of the nobility could be warriors, the American officer corps was patrician and socially privileged. Their commissions proclaimed and conferred upon them the status of gentlemen. As such, they were forbidden to carry an umbrella or a grocery package or to push a baby carriage. They were quite above such mundane matters as business and petty trade. They prided themselves on being oblivious to their salaries, anything but money-grubbing, so long, that is, as they could maintain a certain standard of living, along with a servant or two.

A mild snobbishness pervaded the establishment and molded the individual officers and their families into a close-knit association. The acculturation started as early as "Beast Barracks" for newly arrived cadets at West Point, the initial experience; and for those who entered the Army without

benefit of West Point the conventions and social nuances of the system quickly if subtly made themselves felt, requiring rapid learning and adjustment.

In this society, the environment stressed conformity. Officers lived in a world where seniority prevailed and ruled. Conservatism was a guiding principle, and rigidity flourished. Intellectual life, if it existed at all, was somewhat sterile, the give-and-take of wide-ranging argument largely absent except in very special circumstances, such as at school. As a whole, the profession fled from the image of braininess—"P" Wood being a notable exception. Henry Halleck, a markedly brilliant Civil War officer, was called "Old Brains," but it was pejorative, and officers shunned that sort of ticket. In the 1920s and 30s, officers were noted for their devotion to duty and sound judgment, however the latter was defined. Their intellectual capacities seemed hardly to matter at all.

This is perhaps the factor, the consistent downgrading of intellectual interest and activity, that in large part made the US Army unprepared conceptually for World War II. Even though the war resembled the earlier world war in many basic respects—that is, in the opposing line-ups, in the main instruments of warfare employed, and in the major battlefields fought over—we learned how to fight the second global war from others. We knew little from ourselves, from our own efforts, from our own teachings. Perhaps the strength of this tradition, the refusal to take intellect seriously, the failure to provide for the stretching of intellect, kept the Army from being ready, as well, for the Spanish-American War, World War I, Korea, and Vietnam.

Even more damning of the World War II generation of leaders was their inability to recognize the nature of future warfare. Although the struggle in the 1940s was mainly a conventional and linear war, the manifestations of the conflict to come in the 1950s and later were already present. Unconventional warfare and terrorism could be perceived in the various resistance movements and elsewhere on the far-flung fronts of the contest. Did our leaders notice them, take account of them, prepare to deal with them? They missed these phenomena completely.

The point is that academic excellence, attained and displayed at West Point and the service schools, has rarely been given much weight in later assignments and judgments about proficiency in the profession.[15] Our heroes have usually been those who have been less than brilliant intellectually or who have preferred to play dumb. But if the Army was a good bit alienated from the mainstream of American concerns during the 1920s and 30s, the military, at least in their mild-mannered anti-intellectualism, were together with their civilian counterparts.

My point is not to be construed as a yearning for all our military leaders to be intellectuals, however they are defined. Yet it bears stating that some of our practicing intellectuals, Maxwell Taylor and Jim Gavin, to name

but two, were conspicuously successful field commanders. Thus, in improving upon the past, what seems to be needed is a rigorous intellectual climate and context within which our outstanding commanders and staff officers alike can find encouragement to go beyond the limits of conventional thought in order to stimulate the entire profession.

How good were our military leaders in World War II? They looked good, did the job, and gained victory for us. Were they exceptional or merely adequate? Could we have won with almost any other group in command? It may well be that our top leadership was analogous to the elite forces that implemented the blitzkrieg for Germany. The panzers, the motorized infantry, the self-propelled artillery, the close support aircraft in the vanguard of the attack were actually in very short supply. Behind them, the bulk of the components were horse-drawn.

Was our leadership similarly stratified? Beyond the few really outstanding and visible leaders who made it to the top despite the handicaps of a barely functioning or badly functioning profession, were most of the others at best mediocre? I won't presume to say. But how our small interwar Army produced the leadership that got us successfully through the war remains in large part a miracle and, like most miracles, a mystery.

NOTES

1. Robert H. Berlin, "The United States Army World War II Corps Commanders: A Composite Biography," *Journal of Military History* (formerly *Military Affairs*), 53 (April 1989), 147-67.

2. For three relatively recent departures from the customary blanket approbation of American arms and leadership in World War II, see Trevor N. Dupuy, *A Genius for War: The German Army and General Staff, 1807-1945* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977); Russell F. Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants: The Campaign of France and Germany, 1944-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1981); and Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and US Performance, 1939-1945* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982).

3. See Charles E. Heller and William A. Stofft, eds., *America's First Battles, 1776-1965* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1986), pp. 186-265.

4. For important qualifications to this view, however, see Thomas W. Collier, "The Army and the Great Depression," *Parameters*, 18 (September 1988), 102-08.

5. Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers, 1885-1940* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), p. 239.

6. Charles E. Kirkpatrick, "Filling the Gaps: Re-evaluating Officer Professional Educational in the Inter-War Army, 1920-1940," a paper presented at the American Military Institute Annual Conference, Virginia Military Institute, 14 April 1989.

7. Steve E. Dietrich, "The Professional Reading of General George S. Patton, Jr.," a paper presented at the American Military Institute Annual Convention, Virginia Military Institute, 14 April 1989.

8. Kirkpatrick.

9. *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), p. 1.

10. Edward M. Coffman and Peter F. Herrly, "The American Regular Army Officer Corps between the World Wars: A Collective Biography," *Armed Forces and Society*, 3 (November 1977), 70.

11. Quoted in Coffman and Herrly, p. 71.

12. Herman Wouk, *The Caine Mutiny* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1951), pp. 445-48.

13. *The Twilight of the US Cavalry: Life in the Old Army, 1917-1942* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1989), *passim.*

14. Quoted by Coffman and Herrly, pp. 69-70.

15. Berlin.