

Classics of the Military Field in the Social Sciences

Karl Demeter,

- *Das deutsche Offizierkorps in seinen historisch-soziologischen Grundlagen*, Berlin, Verlag von Reimar Hobbing, 1930;
- *Das deutsche Heer und seine Offiziere*, Berlin, Verlag von Reimar Hobbing, 1935;
- *Das deutsche Offizierkorps in Gesellschaft und Staat, 1650-1945*, Frankfurt am Main, Bernard & Graefe Verlag für Wehrwesen, 1962.
- English translation, with an introduction by Michael Howard : *The German Officer Corps in Society and State, 1650-1945*, New York, Praeger, 1965.

Presented by Bengt Abrahamsson

The books by Karl Demeter listed above obviously have the same theme, and share much the same substance. Indeed, the question can be asked whether they are the same book under various titles, revised and augmented as time went by over more than thirty years, or whether they can be regarded as distinct contributions. The main difference, of course, is that the later editions cover the Third Reich period. While little is known about their reception in Europe apart from Germany (where Demeter seems to have enjoyed high esteem to this day), they powerfully influenced American historiography and military sociology at different times, and with different impacts. This writer's contention is that despite such differences, they ought to be presented together. The main reference in what follows naturally is to the 1962 version.

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On 25th May 1934, Gen. von Blomberg, then Minister of Defence in Adolf Hitler's government, issued the following order to the officers of the German armed forces: "*The old practice of seeking company within a particular social class is no longer any part of the duty of the corps of officers. Our social habits must be permeated by the realization that the whole people forms a single community*".

The idea that the people of Germany might be seen as forming a single community did not come easily to the addressees of von Blomberg's order. The German officer corps had been used to thinking of itself as set off from the main part of society because of its unique – as they saw it – qualities of honour and discipline. After the disgrace of Jena in 1806, the Prussian officer corps had undergone a thorough professional reorganization under the supervision of Scharnhorst and others. This reorganization, although dealing also

with intellectual and technical competencies, had focused particularly on the ethical qualities of the new military.

This focus was conceived primarily as an internal process, i.e. as a restoration of values believed to have been lost during years of moral decay and military setbacks during the Napoleonic Wars. More than an immanent phenomenon, however, the changes in military values and motivation were caused by processes in the society that surrounded the Prussian armed forces, processes that would, during the next 100 years, put the military under great strain, causing bewilderment and uncertainty as to its role and political/social function.

The concepts of honour and discipline that once had seemed the nobility's distinctive preserve, to be staunchly defended by the class of officers, slowly began to lose their social significance. Werner von Blomberg's order of 1934 signifies the ultimate separation of German aristocratic tradition from a new era where *Volksgemeinschaft* came to dominate over occupational seclusion. It was a long course of events during which the components of *Charakter* and *Intellekt* had been in constant contradiction, often putting *Intellekt* in a situation where it temporarily had to succumb to traditional ideas of chivalry and honour.

It began with the artillery. The Prussian nobility had been used to seeing itself as the most important part of the armed forces, with noble origins forming a safe track into officer commissions. The technical requirements that followed from the growth of artillery and engineering had, however, no given link between ascribed status and the mastering of the new complexities of warfare. Karl Demeter carefully documents the struggles between the die-hards of the Prussian nobility and the proponents of military modernization and professionalization.

Gerhard von Scharnhorst, himself a product of eighteenth-century rationalism, began the Prussian reforms by requesting that every officer, whichever arm of service he aspired to, should pass an educational test (Regulation of 6th August 1808). From then on, the contradiction between ascription and achievement became a constant in German officer recruitment. Scharnhorst's order came almost immediately under fire from those circles that had been used to associating officership with birth rights. The changes were truly significant and did not only concern Prussia. In Bavaria, for example, the percentage of noble vs. bourgeois officers changed from 48/52% in 1799 to 13/87% in 1893. In retrospect, considering both the political developments in Germany and social and demographic trends, this trend was indeed a functional necessity. The contemporary elite circles, however, found it hard to recognize such necessities... As late as 1890, the Inspector General of Military Training and Education under Emperor William II wrote, discussing the shortening of courses at War Schools, that the creation of good brother-officers and military leadership qualities should take precedence over technical education. In his words: "*We are not concerned with 'science' at the War Schools as if they were academies*".

As the World War approached, however, and the need for manpower increased, ascription became increasingly obsolete as a recruiting principle. Germany's defeat and the fall of the Kaiser left large sections of the German people stunned. None were more so than the officers. The King had fallen, and in November 1918, the personal intellectual and ideological core of the officer corps' existence suddenly seemed to disappear. Not so for the younger officers, however; they were more broadly recruited and had "*never had the feeling of belonging to the 'first Estate in the land'*". The new generation sometimes even listened to revolutionary messages caused by the post-war turbulence, some messages coming from the Left, but increasingly, during the Weimar period, from the Right. Emerging from the time of "the System" – a common *Schimpfwort* used by Nazis for the years of parliamentary democracy 1919-1933 – was a mixture of traditional elite, right-wing officers, often sceptical of Hitler, and younger upwardly mobile men who saw the military profession as a way to evade economic hardships while preserving a considerable measure of social prestige.

For both groups, Hitler's politics signalled the resurrection of Germany as a major political power and a much-cherished return to the pre-war military order. Steps on this road were the break with the League of Nations in October 1933, the Anglo-German naval agreements (1935), the *Anschluss* of Austria (1938), the Munich agreement (September 1938) and the German-Soviet non-aggression pact (August 1939). These events, each one signalling a rebirth of military might, took place within a period of long-awaited economic and technical reinforcement of all the three branches of the military: Army, Navy and Air Force.

For those officers who were prepared to ignore even the most disquieting news – and they were plenty, as Demeter documents –, these developments came to dominate over some other campaigns of Hitler's, such as the eradication of the SA paramilitary group in 1933, the reinforcement of the SS under Himmler, and the Blomberg-Fritsch affair in 1938 (the latter being perhaps the most dramatic of the many threats to the traditional independence of the German officer corps). The writing on the wall, spelling the subjugation of the professional German military, was visible for a long time before the outbreak of World War II.

Honour and discipline, of course, continued to be cherished concepts all through this period. The Nazi State knew how to turn the traditional Prussian ideals to its advantage. No wonder it succeeded: although lacking decisive political influence, the officer corps could at least claim to guard these traditional values better than any other interest group. Ironically, ascription was back too. Nazi family connections were important 'pull' factors for many military careers. From the reverse perspective, Jewish ancestry excluded jobs in State offices (not that Jews ever had been a significant group among commissioned officers), and later also work opportunities, and made subsistence in general extremely difficult. Being of a certain origin, i.e. nobility, once had been important for officer recruitment. The Nazi era announced the necessity of *not* being of a certain origin, e.g. belonging to Jewish or other minority groups.

Thus Karl Demeter's classic book on the German officer corps, 1650-1945, becomes a between-the-lines lamentation of the failure to create military outlooks and professional qualities compatible with democracy. Even in times of relative progress, such as the Weimar Republic, *Charakter* tended to dominate over *Intellekt*. Constitutional responsibility and willingness to subordinate the military to parliamentary representatives of the people have been rare birds in German history. Whenever educational reform has been attempted, its results have appeared during times and in institutions that have viewed democratic military values as awkward, or seen them as a threat.

It took a number of wars, including two world wars, for German society to realize that the development of military *Charakter* as well as *Intellekt* cannot be achieved in political isolation, and by elites that ascribe to themselves particular gifts and insights. Karl Demeter's book is an invaluable source in shedding light on this problematic. It is less detailed than similar treatments such as Gordon Graig's *The Politics of the Prussian Army 1640-1945* (1955), or F.L. Carstens' *The Reichswehr and Politics, 1918-1933* (1966), but sets itself off by being truly cross-disciplinary. Demeter's book succeeds in bringing together a number of approaches : history, political science, sociology, statistics, even cultural anthropology (e.g., in the analysis of the institution of duelling, strangely revitalized and made legal again by the National Socialists in 1938). From whichever perspective one approaches the book, it will offer a rich and provocative fare.

No wonder, then, that it has become a central reference for most subsequent historians, and influenced sociologists and political scientists concerned with military professionalism¹ early on in America. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* cites *Das deutsche Heer und seine Offiziere* in his chapter on the rise of the military profession. Morris Janowitz, in *The Professional Soldier*, quoted the second (1935) edition as one his rare avowed inspirations.² One easily sees why: Karl Demeter led the way to the study of the military profession, emphasizing the function of social origins, education and professional socialization, ethos, etc. Demeter's legacy is inspiring, indeed invaluable, and his pioneering study has given important impulses to later generations of researchers within the field of military professionalization and civil-military relations.

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¹ Gwyn Harries-Jenkins, "Landmarks in Defense Literature", *Defense Analysis*, vol.1, n°1, 1985.

² Michel L. Martin, "Of Arms and the Man", in M.L Martin & Ellen Stern McCrate (eds.), *The Military, Militarism, and the Polity : Essays in Honor of Morris Janowitz*, New York, Free Press, 1984, p.15.