

*Excerpt from Gwynne Dyer's excellent book
WAR, 1985*

You've got to keep distant from [your soldiers]. The officer-enlisted man distance helps. This is one of the most painful things, having to withhold sometimes your affection for them, because you know you're going to have to destroy them on occasion. And you do. You use them up: they're material. And part of being a good officer is knowing how much of them you can use up and still get the job done.

—Paul Fussell, infantry officer, World War II

Officers play a very large role in battles, and their casualties are usually higher proportionally than those of the enlisted men. The brief life expectancy of infantry lieutenants on the Western Front in World War I is legendary, but the figures were actually worse in World War II.

It occurred to me to count the number of officers who had served in the Battalion since D-Day. Up to March 27th, the end of the Rhine crossing [less than ten months] . . . I found that we had had 55 officers commanding the twelve rifle platoons, and that their average service with the Battalion was 38 days. . . . Of these 53% were wounded, 24% killed or died of wounds, 15% invalided, and 5% survived.

—Col. M. Lindsay, 1st Gordon Highlanders⁴

In general, officer casualties in the British and American armies in World War II, in the rifle battalions that did most of the fighting, were around twice as high proportionally as the casualties among enlisted men.⁵

Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference in the officer's experience of battle. He feels as much fear and is exposed to as much danger as his men, but except in the most extreme circumstances, he will not be using a weapon himself. His role is to direct those who do and make them go on doing it. The task officers must perform and the circumstances in which they must do it have instilled in them a very special view of the world and how it works.

I went where I was told to go and did what I was told to do, but no more. I was scared shitless just about all the time.

James Jones, infantry private, World War II

If blood was brown, we'd all have medals.

Canadian sergeant, northwest Europe, 1944–45

Fear is not just a state of mind; it is a physical thing. With its useful mania for questionnaires, the U.S. Army set out during World War II to find out just how

much fear affected the ability of soldiers to perform on the battlefield. In one infantry division in France in August 1944, 65 percent of the soldiers admitted that they had been unable to do their jobs properly because of extreme fear on at least one occasion, and over two fifths said it had happened repeatedly.

In another U.S. infantry division in the South Pacific, over two thousand soldiers were asked about the physical symptoms of fear: 84 percent said they had a violent pounding of the heart, and over three fifths said they shook or trembled all over. Around half admitted to feeling faint, breaking out in a cold sweat, and feeling sick to their stomachs. Over a quarter said they had vomited, and 21 percent said they had lost control of their bowels.⁶ These figures are based only on voluntary admissions, of course, and the true ones are probably higher in all categories, especially the more embarrassing ones. James Jones's remark about being "scared shitless" was not just a colorful expression.

This is the raw material with which officers must conduct their battles: men whose training and self-respect and loyalty to their close friends around them are very nearly outweighed by extreme physical terror and a desperate desire not to die. Soldiers in battle, however steady they may appear, are always a potential mob capable of panic and flight, and armies must expend an enormous amount of effort, beginning in basic training and continuing on the battlefield, to keep them in action.

The officer's task has grown even more difficult over time, for he no longer has all his men lined up in ranks under the eagle eyes of his NCOs, in a situation in which as long as they continue to go through the mechanical motions of loading and firing, they are being militarily effective. Modern ground forces fight in circumstances of extreme dispersion in which it is impossible for the officer to exercise direct supervision and control over his men's actions. Though the structure of command, compulsion, and punishment for poor performance remains in place, the officer must now rely much more on persuasion and manipulation of his men.

You lead by example. I don't think it was unknown that I was afraid to be shot at. I didn't like it; I don't think anybody does, but I did what had to be done, given the situation at any given time, and I think that's a contagious-type thing. When the shooting starts and things start happening, you do what has to be done, and other people start doing what has to be done, and it's a team effort.

—Lt. Col. Michael Petty, U.S. Army, Vietnam, 1969–71

If too many soldiers in a unit fail to do their jobs, nobody is likely to survive. This approach to leadership, therefore, often produces acceptable results, especially in small wars like Vietnam, in which casualties are relatively low (only about one in fifty of the U.S. soldiers who served in Vietnam was killed), and episodes of intensive combat are generally brief and intermittent. It was the collapse of morale, not the attrition of combat, that destroyed the U.S. Army's fighting capability in Vietnam.

But in large-scale warfare between regular armies, things are different, and have been for at least the past two generations. In any big battle down to the latter part of the nineteenth century, the dead and wounded on a single day of fighting could amount to up to 40 or 50 percent of the men engaged, and the average figure was rarely less than 20 percent. Given a couple of battles a year, the infantryman stood an even chance of being killed or wounded for each year the war continued—a very discouraging prospect. But for 363 days of the year, it was merely a hypothetical prospect, for he was not in battle or even in close contact with the enemy on those days. He might be cold, wet, tired, and hungry much of the time—if it was the campaigning season and the army was maneuvering around the countryside—but for a good part of the year he was probably billeted somewhere indoors at night. In such circumstances the high probability that he would be dead or wounded within the year could be dealt with in the same sort of way that everybody deals with the eventual certainty of death.

The navies and air forces of today fight a kind of war that is still recognizably the same in its psychological effects. On a warship there is the constant psychological strain of being below deck knowing that a torpedo could hit at any time, but actual close contact with an enemy rarely averages more than a few hours a month. Even the bomber crews of World War II, whose life expectancy was measured in months, were still fighting that kind of war, although in an extreme form: in between the brief moments of stark terror when the flak or the fighters came too close, they slept between clean sheets and might even get to the pub some evenings. But for armies, things have changed irreversibly.

There is no such thing as "getting used to combat." . . . Each moment of combat imposes a strain so great that men will break down in direct relation to the intensity and duration of their exposure.

U.S. Army psychological investigation into the effects of combat

The most striking visible sign of the change that has made ground warfare so much harder on the soldiers, paradoxically, is a steep drop in the casualty toll in a day of battle. Unlucky small units can still be virtually exterminated in an hour when something goes badly wrong, but the average daily loss for a division-sized force in intensive combat in World War II was about 2 percent of its personnel. For entire armies, the casualties even on the first day of a great offensive rarely amount to 1 percent. The lethality of weapons has increased several thousandfold since the time of Napoleon, but the extent to which the potential targets of those weapons have spread out is even greater, and it is certainly far safer to be a soldier on any given day of battle in the twentieth century than it was a hundred or a thousand years ago. The problem for the soldiers is that battles can now continue for weeks, with individual units being sent back in at frequent intervals, and the battles follow each other in quick succession.

In terms of overall casualties per year, the loss rate is cumulatively about the same as it was in earlier times, with combat infantrymen facing at best an even

chance of death or a serious wound within a year. But the psychological effect is very different. Being in contact with the enemy and exposed to the elements most of the time, being shelled every day, and living amid constant death gradually erodes men's desperate faith in their own hope of survival and eventually destroys everybody's courage and will. Anyone can be brave once, but nobody can go on forever: "Your courage flows at its outset with the fullest force and thereafter diminishes; perhaps if you are very brave it diminishes imperceptibly, but it does diminish . . . and it can never behave otherwise," wrote a British soldier who had been through too much.⁸

The U.S. Army concluded during World War II that almost every soldier, if he escaped death or wounds, would break down after 200 to 240 "combat days"; the British, who rotated their troops out of the front line more often, reckoned 400 days, but they agreed that breakdown was inevitable. The reason that only about one sixth of the casualties were psychiatric was that most combat troops did not survive long enough to go to pieces.

The pattern was universal, in all units of every nationality on all fronts. After the first few days of combat, in which the members of a fresh unit would show signs of constant fear and apprehension, they would learn to distinguish the truly dangerous phenomena of combat from the merely frightening, and their confidence and performance steadily improved. After three weeks they were at their peak—and then the long deterioration began. By the sixth week of continuous combat, two Army psychiatrists who accompanied a U.S. infantry battalion in 1944 reported, most soldiers had become convinced of the inevitability of their own death and had stopped believing that their own skill or courage could make any difference: "As far as they were concerned the situation was one of absolute hopelessness. . . . The soldier was slow-witted. . . . Mental defects became so extreme that he could not be counted on to relay a verbal order. . . . He remained almost constantly in or near his slit trench, and during acute actions took little or no part, trembling constantly." At this point the "two thousand-year stare" appeared (in Vietnam it was known as the "thousand-yard stare"), and the next stage was catatonia or total disorientation and breakdown.⁹

The amount of time it took soldiers to reach this point varied from individual to individual and could be greatly extended if they had some periods of relief from combat, but almost everybody was bound to get there eventually. The principal reason that relatively few entire units collapsed was that the same combat environment that produced these symptoms also caused so many casualties that there was a constant flow of replacements. (The Soviet army's casualties in 1943, for example, were 80 percent of the forces engaged, and the same in 1944.) Most units in prolonged combat in modern war, therefore, consist of an uneasy mixture of some utterly green and unsure replacements, some surviving veterans of many months of combat, most of whom are nearing collapse, and a proportion of soldiers—the larger the better, from the unit's point of view—who are still in transition from the former stage to the latter.

Given the prevailing uncertainty about the most vital and basic questions in battle (Where is the enemy? Will we be alive an hour from now?) that both commanders and troops must tolerate, every element of stability and familiarity that can be provided is most valuable. This is why many armies place such emphasis on a stable regimental system in which men have served together for a long time, and on the preservation of traditions that will give men under great stress a collective memory and example of how other men have behaved in similar circumstances (even if this often involves a considerable distortion of history).

This is the reality that an officer must deal with (if he is not yet too far gone himself to cope with it), and except in the very first experiences of a unit in combat he must reckon at best with the state of mind described by Brig. Gen. S. L. A. Marshall:

Wherever one surveys the forces of the battlefield, it is to see that fear is general among men, but to observe further that men commonly are loath that their fear will be expressed in specific acts which their comrades will recognize as cowardice. The majority are unwilling to take extraordinary risks and do not aspire to a hero's role, but they are equally unwilling that they should be considered the least worthy among those present. . . .

The seeds of panic are always present in troops so long as they are in the midst of physical danger. The retention of self-discipline . . . depends upon the maintaining of an appearance of discipline within the unit. . . . When other men flee, the social pressure is lifted and the average soldier will respond as if he had been given a release from duty, for he knows that his personal failure is made inconspicuous by the general dissolution!¹⁰

The experienced professional officer takes an unromantic view of men's behavior under stress and believes that all his efforts in war amount to no more than trying to build shaky bridges across chaos with highly volatile human material. A young American infantry officer was strikingly frank about these realities to the survivors of his company in a postcombat debriefing that Marshall attended after the company had assaulted a small German fort outside Brest in 1944. The men had made a remarkable seven hundred-yard charge across an open field, which caused most of the German garrison to flee, and reached the cover of a hedgerow only fifteen yards from the fort. But they could not then be persuaded to get up and cross the scant remaining distance for seven hours, although only a handful of German defenders remained.

You have a plan. You have an objective. Your men get started with the objective in mind. But in the course of getting to the objective and taking up fire positions, disorganization sets in. The men look for cover and that scatters them. Fire comes against them and that scatters their thoughts. They no longer think as a group but as individuals. Each man wants to

stay where he is. To get them going again as a group, an officer must expose himself to the point of suicide. The men are in a mental slump; they always get that way when they have taken a great risk. . . . It is harder to get men to mop up after a charge than to get them to charge.

Lt. Robert W. Rideout, Brest, 1944¹¹

Marshall offers dozens of instances of the “lightning emotional changes” of men in combat, which will cause “the same group of soldiers [to] act like lions and then like scared hares within the passage of a few minutes.” He is also acutely aware of how easily the apparent authority of officers can be undermined by the reluctance of the soldiers. They may, for example, seize upon the failure of some promised element of support for an attack (tanks, an artillery barrage, etc.) to arrive at the right time in the promised quantities: “The men squat in their foxholes and count. If they see a default anywhere they feel this gives them a moral excuse to default in their portion. They procrastinate and argue. . . .” In the end the attack goes off halfheartedly, without hope of success. “The rule for the soldier,” Marshall concludes, “should be that given the Australian mounted infantryman when he asked the Sphinx for the wisdom of the ages: ‘Don’t expect too much!’ ”¹²

Everything army officers know about the behavior of men in combat leads them toward the same conclusion: that man is a frail and fallible creature who requires strong leadership and firm discipline in order to behave properly and function effectively. This fundamental pessimism about the limits of heroism and idealism is the central phenomenon in the professional soldiers’ world. Such pessimism plays a very large part in defining the “military mind” despite all of the counterrhetoric about heroism and idealism in which some soldiers indulge on public occasions.

On the outermost margins of human experience, where they must operate in combat, military officers’ assumptions about human nature are absolutely right, and they would be less than professional if they did not recognize them. And this essentially tragic view of human nature is reinforced and broadened by what they know about the nature of battle itself: that it is an environment where nothing works reliably, and no plan or stratagem succeeds for very long. A profession that knows that its basic function—waging and winning wars—can never be reduced to a rational, predictable, controllable activity, despite all the effort and intelligence that men devote to it, is bound to take a rather jaundiced view of the perfectibility of human institutions.

The military ethic emphasizes the permanence of irrationality, weakness and evil in human affairs. It stresses the supremacy of society over the individual and the importance of order, hierarchy and division of function.

It accepts the nation state as the highest form of political organization and recognizes the continuing likelihood of war among nation states. . . . It exalts obedience as the highest virtue of military men. . . . It is, in brief, realistic and conservative.

—Samuel Huntington¹³

Much of Huntington's classic definition of the "military mind" would have applied to long-serving military officers of the distant past, but there is an added dimension to it now, for it represents the outlook of a separate and specialized profession. Although there have always been full-time specialists in the military art at the lower levels of armies' command structures, it is only in the past few centuries that there has come into existence in every country an autonomous body of people—the professional military officers—whose sole task is to maintain the armed forces in peacetime and lead them in war.

Profession is the correct word for the calling of the career officer today, in much the same sense that the word is applied to older professions like medicine or the law. The officer corps is a self-regulating body of men and women with expert knowledge of a complex intellectual discipline. It has a monopoly of the exercise of its function, and the exclusive right to select and train those new members who will be admitted to the discipline. Its client is society as a whole (through the mediation of the government, its sole employer), and it enjoys special privileges in compensation for its grave responsibilities. And, like any other profession, it also has a wide range of corporate interests and views to defend and advance. There were wars long before there was a professional officer corps, but the existence of an entire profession dedicated to the study of military affairs and the enhancement of military techniques has certainly influenced the character of wars and perhaps their frequency as well.

If you believe the doctors, nothing is wholesome; if you believe the theologians, nothing is innocent; if you believe the soldiers, nothing is safe.

Lord Salisbury

The professional military officer's view of the world is not merely the fruit of his personal experience of the realities of combat; indeed, in many instances he has not personally seen combat. Most armies, most of the time, are remarkably nonviolent organizations. The major European armies have been at war with each other for less than 10 percent of the past 150 years. But every nation's armed forces now consciously educates its officers in the perspectives and values appropriate to their profession, as much as in the technical aspects of their job, and at the summit of the organization is an institution that concentrates all this in a particularly potent form: the general staff.

The birth date of the military profession as an autonomous body with its own corporate views and interests, derived from its professional responsibilities and not from mere personal ambitions, was 25 November 1803, when the first true general staff was created in Prussia. Its intended function was to apply to war the same principles of rational organization and planning that were already transforming civil society in Europe. The Prussian general staff's long-range task was to develop fundamental principles for military operations that would provide guidance for commanders in all circumstances; its shorter-term duties were to prepare detailed war plans and solve current military problems.

The only title to an officer's commission shall be in time of peace, education and professional knowledge; in time of war, distinguished valor and perception. From the entire nation, therefore, all individuals who possess these qualities are eligible for the highest military posts. All previously existing class preference in the military establishment is abolished, and every man, without regard to his origins, has equal duties and equal rights.

decree on selection of officers, Prussian army, 1808¹⁴

Within only a few years of the creation of the general staff, the shock of defeat by Napoleon drove the Prussian army to cast aside all the traditions that had made eighteenth-century warfare an ad hoc business run by amateur officers whose main qualification was aristocratic birth. Entry into the officer corps now depended on high educational qualifications and examinations on military subjects, and promotion was largely governed by performance reports and further exams. In 1810, the army founded a staff college (the *Kriegsakademie*) where a small number of gifted middle-rank officers attended an extremely demanding one-year course in subjects ranging from military history, tactics, and military administration to foreign languages, mathematics, and "special geography and geology"—and in due course it became the rule that only *Kriegsakademie* graduates could be promoted to high rank or appointed to the general staff. In less than a decade, Prussia had laid all the necessary foundations for a fully professional officer corps.¹⁵

The controlling assumption behind all these changes was the Prussian army's realization, born of defeat at the hands of Napoleon, that the aristocracy's pretensions to an inborn talent for war were hollow, and that no country could afford to gamble on a self-taught military genius like Frederick the Great or Napoleon turning up to save it at the crucial moment. Instead, the Prussian military reformers had concluded that the "art of war," like law or medicine or any other profession, was actually a body of technical knowledge and inherited practical experience that could be formulated and taught in such a way that men of ordinary intelligence and personality could become extremely competent in it.

It was typical of the great intellectual vigor of Prussian military thought at the time that one of the *Kriegsakademie's* first directors was Karl von Clausewitz, who wrote the first (and still the most perceptive) general study of the theory and practice of war, called simply *On War*, during his term there. In the end, every other

major power imitated the Prussian innovations and professionalized its own armed forces, but in some cases it took almost a century. The enormous practical advantage that the Prussian army (and its successor, the German army) gained from this early adoption of a rigorously professional approach to war was still very evident only forty years ago.

One of the things that emerged from our study of operations on the Western Front and in Italy in World War II was that there was a consistent superiority of German ground troops to American and British ground troops. As a retired American army officer this didn't particularly please me, but I can't deny what my numbers tell me. . . . I had assumed that by 1944 we would have learned enough that we would be approximately equal, [but] in combat units 100 Germans in mid-1944 were the equivalent of somewhere around 125 American or British soldiers. . . . At about the same time 100 Germans were the equivalent of about 250 Russians. . . . Now this doesn't mean that the average German was any more intelligent, any braver, any stronger, any more motivated than the average Russian, but it means that when they were put together in combat units . . . the Germans used their weapons and equipment 2.5 times better than did the Russians.

What [the Germans] did, in effect, was to institutionalize military excellence . . . and more than any other single factor it was the German general staff that made the difference. . . . There were generals in World War II, Russian generals, American generals, British generals, who were as good as the best of the Germans, but the Germans had about ten times as many very good generals.

—Col. T. N. Dupuy, U.S. Army ret'd.

In the end the Germans lost World War II, as they had World War I; good generalship is only one factor, and a relatively minor one, in total war. The early professionalization of the German officer corps ensured a high level of technical competence throughout the armed forces, but what Germany really needed to avoid the catastrophic defeats of 1918 and 1945 was the kind of strategic foresight that would have kept the nation from getting into wars in which it faced overwhelming enemy superiority in numbers and resources in the first place. This is what general staffs are supposed to provide—but even allowing for the fact that they usually do not control all the diplomatic, political, economic, and emotional factors that go into their country's choice of enemies, they have not historically done very well at this task.

It was Clausewitz who first drew a clear distinction between war as an independent field of activity with its own rules and logic, and the subordinate relationship of war to the general political objectives of the state. Armies do not exist for their own purposes; they are hirelings of the state, and all their plans and actions, however logical in terms of simply "winning" a battle or a war, must submit to the test of whether they actually further the political purposes of the state. This is the

standard relationship of any profession to its clients. In the military case, however, the tail has often ended up wagging the dog.

The classic example was the Schlieffen Plan, drawn up by the Chief of the German General Staff in the first decade of this century, on the assumption that in any European war Germany would have to fight on two fronts—against Russia and France. Bearing in mind the smaller physical size of France and Russia's army probably being only partially mobilized, Schlieffen concluded that the solution to Germany's military problem would be to attack France with almost the entire German army at the very outbreak of war (leaving only about one ninth of it to cover the Russian frontier) and to win a decisive victory against France within six weeks.

Even as a purely technical military solution, it had grave defects; politically it was a horror. To find the space necessary to move his huge army into France quickly and to take the French in the rear, Schlieffen planned an attack through neutral Belgium (although that would almost certainly bring Britain into the war against Germany too). Far worse, his plan committed Germany to attack France at the start of *any* war, even if the actual cause of the war should lie (as it eventually did) at the other end of Europe. His planning gave Germany's civil authorities no political options—and the elaborate technical considerations that governed the process of mobilization for war left the civilians in a very weak position to demand changes when the crisis was upon them.

Mobilization plans were an obsession with the general staffs of all the European powers before 1914. They all believed that the first battles of a war would be decisive. It was therefore crucial to get the millions of army reservists to the frontiers, ready to fight, as quickly as possible. To that end they all prepared mobilization schedules filling entire volumes, which consisted mainly of elaborately interlocking timetables for the movement of those troops to the frontiers by train.

In theory, mobilization is a military precaution and a diplomatic warning, not an irrevocable declaration of war. In practice, once the first European power mobilized, every country found itself on a nonstop train to war. The general staffs elsewhere demanded that their own governments mobilize immediately in response—otherwise they could not guarantee the safety of the frontiers when the enemy's mobilization was completed. And then, whenever the increasingly frightened governments tried to draw back from the headlong rush to war, the general staff planners pointed out that the mobilization schedules would be hopelessly disrupted if they were stopped midway. There would be troops and trains stranded all over the place, often without the fuel and food they required, and it might take weeks to start the process moving again once it stopped.

The operation was successful, but the patient died (as a different profession would put it). The governments of Europe believed what they were told by their military professionals, and the trains delivered them punctually into World War I. (Any similarities with the present mobilization and war plans of NATO and the Warsaw Pact are, of course, purely coincidental.)

Armed forces are given vast resources over long years by governments, on the tacit assumption (by the latter) that this will buy them military security. Moreover,

professional soldiers will generally pander to this illusion in peacetime to the extent necessary to extract the money they want for new weapons or other military measures, promising that they will solve some security problem or other. The more serious officers themselves realize that there can be no certainty of success in war, but naturally they find it very embarrassing to have to admit this to their civilian clients and will generally avoid doing so for as long as possible. One of the likeliest places for peace to founder is in the gap between civilian and military assumptions about the predictability of the outcome of war.

The professionalization of the world's armed forces has not been an unalloyed benefit, even in circumstances short of overt crisis. The rivalries between the three or more separate services maintained by most countries frequently lead to an exaggeration of the alleged threats facing a country in order to justify the acquisition of some specific new weapon by a particular service or generally to advance its cause in the perennial interservice competition for resources. This phenomenon has much to do with technological change and the matrix of interlocking interests known in the United States as the "military-industrial complex," but the fact that all senior officers are now career professionals—whose promotion prospects and reputation depend mainly on the opinion of their peers within the same service—tends to stifle any broader critical analysis of arms policies from within the services themselves.

Moreover, since it is the professional duty of military officers to identify threats to the security of the state, they are constantly searching for potential dangers abroad—and virtually every other state within military reach constitutes such a threat simply by virtue of having armed forces of its own. The planning reflex of general staffs provides governments with detailed and regularly updated scenarios for conflicts in unlikely places with improbable enemies (as late as the 1920s military planners in the United States and Canada were maintaining carefully worked out plans to invade each other), which on occasion can lend undue military importance to minor incidents and alarms. After World War II, for example, the United States divided the entire world into a series of military zones that were the responsibility of various military commands, with the inevitable result that any event anywhere by definition became potentially a matter of military concern for the United States.

General staffs did not create the international environment in which wars are inevitable, but they have certainly contributed to some wars and to many arms races by spreading their professional perceptions of insecurity in their own countries and creating corresponding feelings of insecurity in other countries by their weapons acquisitions. And in many states where the civil institutions are weak, the emergence of a professional military institution has even led to repeated military coups as the officer corps enforces its view of the world on the rest of the community or reacts against civilians who are unwise enough to challenge its corporate privileges.

Officers in countries where civil-military relations have never fallen to this level of discord see such behavior as unprofessional, but the fact remains that the era of military coups in various parts of the world roughly coincides with the emergence of an autonomous military profession in the region. Professional officer corps are organizations with strong corporate views and interests and sufficient

resources to overcome or suppress most rival institutions in the state if they choose to do so.

Notwithstanding all the foregoing disadvantages and derelictions of duty of professional armed forces, however, one thing can be said with confidence: the military profession, especially in the great powers, hardly ever wants war. As a czarist officer once remarked, war “spoils the armies.”

Under the stress of total war, many armies have gone to the verge of collapse or beyond. The Russian army dissolved in 1917, and the French and Italian armies came close to following suit. The Austrian and German armies collapsed in 1918, and the British army hovered on the brink for a time. The French army did collapse in 1940, and the Italians in 1943.

There is, moreover, no reliable means of predicting when collapse may occur. A combination of huge casualties and demoralization at home destroyed the Russian army's will to fight in 1917, while similar circumstances did not cause the Soviet army to collapse in 1942. The French mutinies of 1917, which were a spontaneous outburst of resentment by the men in the trenches, who felt their lives were being wasted in futile and foredoomed offensives, were contained (barely) by the decisive actions of the high command, whereas the disintegration of the French army in 1940 was mainly due to demoralization and despair in the high command: Most French troops fought very hard in 1940, and with more intelligent control from the center, they might even have succeeded in creating a new Western Front rather than being destroyed piecemeal by the German attack. But though the causes of collapse are unpredictable, it is clear to professional soldiers that mass armies, for all their enormous power, are also very fragile. And if they break, everything can be lost.

Professional military men always want to prepare for war, for “nothing is safe,” but they are almost invariably reluctant to actually enter into war—this was as true of the military profession in the fascist states as in any others—because they are too aware of the sheer unpredictability of the outcome. Most of the exceptions to this generalization are in fact military-ruled states where the leaders of the armed forces have assumed the powers and some of the attitudes of politicians and have lost their professional military perspective.

Soldiers are not, on the whole, warmongers, but the “military mind”—the professional military perspective on human affairs—nevertheless exercises an enormous influence on how the business of mankind is conducted. The perspective is by no means arbitrary or narrowly self-serving; it is grounded in the military officers' recognition of the unpleasant realities of their profession.

They know that human beings under stress are usually not heroic, that the world is a far less rational and predictable place than most civilians like to pretend, and that deadly conflict between nations is an intrinsic part of the existing international system. They know all these things because the focus of their profession is battle, which makes these truths impossible to ignore. Professional military officers understand in their bones the role of power, compulsion, and brute force in human affairs.