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Lectures on Military History for 1942

Major-General G. M. Lindsay

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The Lees Knowles Lectures on Military History for 1942

THE
WAR ON THE
CIVIL AND MILITARY FRONTS

by

MAJOR-GENERAL G. M. LINDSAY

C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O.

Colonel Commandant, Royal Tank Regiment :

Deputy Regional Commissioner,

South-Western Region



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Preface

These lectures were written between 1 December 1941 and 1 February 1942 in the period marked by the opening of the Russian counter-offensive, General Rommel's retirement and second come-back in Libya and the overrunning of Malaya by Japan. The canvas of the war is world-wide, the kaleidoscope dazzling. The course of our fortunes since September 1939 has been chequered, threat and recovery, counter-offensive and setback alternating with bewildering speed. At one and the same time battles are in progress in Arctic waters, snow-bound steppes, sand-swept desert and steaming jungle. Whether history will one day say that here political strategy committed us to battle at a tactical disadvantage or that there tactical and technical deficiencies brought political strategy to grief, it is yet too soon to conjecture. For one thing the facts are not available. All that we can do now is to try and bring the scene into something like perspective and to study it through the glasses which it is the endeavour of military science to supply—with glasses which take a wide sweep from the munition plant to the battlefield. But we may say with confidence that never before has our country been confronted with problems of such magnitude. By the time-table of the late war we are now on the eve of Vimy Ridge, which was the beginning of the penultimate stage. In 1939 we had no Expeditionary Force comparable in readiness or modernity to that of 1914. In 1940 we lost the continental base which in 1915 we held till we advanced from it to final victory. In 1941 in the Middle East we were dislodged from the equivalent of Salonika. Once and only once have we been able to fight from a logical base, namely in the air battle of 1940 over Britain. Our main military effort has been made perforce from Suez under conditions markedly less favourable than those of 1914–18; for then we shared the Mediterranean with France and Italy, but now, while the enemy operates on inner lines with only a short sea passage from Sicily, we have to reinforce our army by a sea route of some thousands of miles. A temporary retirement may bring the enemy back to fresh stores of heavier weapons and thus in the end be a gain to him, whereas a temporary retirement may be imposed on us for the reason that

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the Far East can be reinforced more quickly from Suez than from Britain or America. That we have maintained continuous action on land, taking blow after blow from so many quarters, has been possible only for two reasons: the service of the Navy in convoy and interception, and the service of the Air Force in arsenal defence and long-range offensive. Meanwhile the land forces of Britain and the Empire, facing difficulties both material and psychological—the material difficulties of late rearmament and the psychological difficulties of distance from home and familiar terrain—have never failed to give of their utmost, even when that utmost involved replenishing an ally to the prejudice of themselves. Once again it is too soon to pronounce judgment even on a single theatre of the war, but assuredly when judgment is passed, it will pay tribute to the resilience and ubiquity of our military effort.

When a country's experience is drawn from so many theatres, the task of extracting the right lessons from it is enhanced both in difficulty and essential importance. Therefore we must try to find mental life-lines and to grasp the central truths of a strongly centrifugal scene. History can be either a hindrance or a boon. It is a hindrance if we discourage ourselves by dwelling on the easier victories of the past or by fretting over recent disappointments. It is a boon if we probe it so deeply that it reveals enduring lessons and furnishes principles on which to think and act. Making history has two very different senses. The hero, or assassin, makes history in one sense. The stream of things, with its heroisms and crimes among them, makes history in another and deeper sense. The climber's rope has running through it a red strand, signifying that it has been tested to hold. Can we in the study of history find a military rope that will stand the present strain? It is worth the search; for the rope that will hold the military arm will hold the civil arm also—will hold, in fact, the whole people. The University of Newton and Pitt, of Castlereagh and Darwin will concede at least that alike from the angles of science and statecraft military history has work to do which is very proper to a principal place of Higher Education and Research.

When I had the honour, and indeed I knew full well what a great honour it was, to be invited to deliver the Lees Knowles

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lectures, it was only natural that I should wonder if I had the background necessary for so onerous a task. I accepted because I felt that, given the ability to translate it into words, I had the experience, perhaps almost unique in its way, which entitled me to deal with modern war both on the civil and military fronts.

It will be generally admitted that the two outstanding weapons of modern land warfare are the machine gun and the tank. The first I had made my especial study during the last war, during which, amongst others, I held the appointments of Staff Officer to the Machine Gun Training Centre at Grantham, Chief Instructor to the G.H.Q. Machine Gun School in France, and Army Machine Gun Officer to the First Army during the last year of the war. In addition I had written the official manual on the Tactical Employment of Machine Guns, S.S. 192 of January 1918. I had therefore had great opportunity for studying the evolution of the weapon that was the undisputed master of the battlefield from the first day of the war until the development of that other master weapon, the tank, deprived it of pride of place.

From the end of the war onwards I devoted myself to the study of Mechanized Warfare or, as we later always called it, Armoured War. In this sphere again I had an almost unique opportunity for study, for I was successively Commander of the First Armoured Car Group in Iraq, Chief Instructor Royal Tank Corps Central Schools, Inspector Royal Tank Corps at the War Office, Brigadier-General Staff Egypt with a special mandate from the then C.I.G.S. to study mechanized warfare in the desert, and Commander of the 7th (Mechanized Experimental) Infantry Brigade on Salisbury Plain. I was then promoted Major-General and, while on half-pay, was commissioned by the War Office to set the paper for the Staff College examination which deals with Modern Warfare and to write a new manual on Armoured and Mechanized War.

From this I proceeded to India as Commander of the Presidency and Assam District, which comprises the provinces of Assam, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Here I dealt with the Governors, Civil Service and Police of these four provinces as well as with a considerable force of soldiers, regular and irregular, British and Indian. In addition, with the assistance of Sir John Anderson, then Governor of Bengal, and later with the collaboration of his successor the late Lord Brabourne, I had much to do with organizing the Youth Movement in Bengal. These experiences brought me

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into close contact with every class, official and unofficial, civil and military, British and Indian.

From them all, throughout my time in India, I received nothing but help, kindness and a collaboration leading to many new friendships, Indian and British, which made my stay in India one of the happiest times of my life, and gave me an increased knowledge of humanity which has stood me in good stead. For the first six months of this war I commanded a Highland Division and in April 1940 I was given my present appointment. For the first time I came into intimate contact with the local government of England and its officials: and my experience here, like that in India, has been one of ever-increasing kindness, help and collaboration, with an ever-growing circle of new friendships. It has indeed been a time during which I have learnt much that was new to me, and done much hard work, but in an atmosphere that has made the learning of the deepest interest and the work itself a real pleasure. In my present duties I have had the pleasure and the advantage of having as my Regional Commissioner my old friend Sir Hugh Elles of Tank Corps fame in the last war. Therefore, when I came to prepare these lectures, I could truly feel that I had the background and experience for dealing with both the civil and military fronts of modern war.

My time at Cambridge was indeed a pleasant one; for, as the guest of Professor G. M. Trevelyan, the Master of Trinity, and of Sir Will Spens, Master of Corpus Christi and Regional Commissioner, I received all the kindness and help it was possible for them to extend to me. But the man to whom, above all, I owe the deepest debt of gratitude is my old friend of machine gun days in the last war, Mr C. R. Fay of Christ's. If these lectures have achieved any merit, it is due to his unflinching help, collaboration and inspiration. Without his help I could have achieved little; as a result of it I trust that what I have now written will be of some value to those who may think it worthy of their consideration.

GEORGE LINDSAY

BRISTOL
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