

CSI REPORT

No. 12

Evaluating Historical Materials

by

Dr. Larry D. Roberts



**COMBAT
STUDIES
INSTITUTE**

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1. Conduct research on historical topics pertinent to the doctrinal concerns of the Army and publish the results in a variety of formats for the Active Army and Reserve Components.
2. Prepare and present instruction in military history at USACGSC and assist other USACGSC departments in integrating military history into their instruction.
3. Serve as the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command's executive agent for the development and coordination of an integrated, progressive program of military history instruction in the TRADOC service school system.

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In this publication, when the masculine gender is used, both men and women are included.

Many who read history make the mistake of accepting at face value all the information an author presents. This is true of those reading a single history book and those conducting historical research and analysis. In reality, only part of any historical work is uncontested fact; the rest is the author's interpretation or opinion of how and why things happened. In addition, errors of fact can easily be found in most books, articles, or documents due to the author's error or errors in the documents he used in his research. The realization of these failings often causes some readers to go to the extreme of doubting all that they read. History can be of immense value to any reader, including the professional soldier, if these shortcomings are recognized and the facts are carefully sifted. To do this, the reader must critically evaluate the book he is reading or the materials he is using in his analysis.

This CSI Report deals with ideas and techniques the professional soldier can use to assess historical materials critically. The soldier can apply this evaluation process to individual history books or the assorted documents, articles, and monographs used in historical research. There is nothing complex or even magical about this procedure. The techniques are basically the same commonsense rules or guides the average person uses every day. Essentially, the reader, much as a consumer, is concerned with the quality of the materials used in making the item, the craftsmanship of the person or persons who did the work, and the purpose for which the item was designed to serve.

Areas of Evaluation

For any historical writing, the first point to examine is the expertise or qualifications of the author. The writer's breadth and depth of knowledge, skill in finding and using sources, and ability to marshal facts to support his interpretations are essential in the reliability and value of a historical work. The author's competence or ability to do these things is generally based on one or more of three general backgrounds: academic preparation, extensive personal research, and/or personal experience. Each has its own value and limitations.

The completion of a graduate program in history or one of the associated disciplines means that the individual has attained a basic level of knowledge in his field of specialization and has developed, to a degree, research and analysis skills. The reader should not accept an author's expertise in a subject simply because the author has a master's degree or even a doctorate. If the subject of the historical work falls within the author's principal area of academic study, then the reader can accept the writer's competency to deal with the material. For example, a historian who spent his formative education studying German operations in World War II is probably able to write intelligently about the *Wehrmacht* on the Eastern Front. However, a book on Soviet infiltration tactics written by an individual with a German intellectual background may be suspect. It is possible, however, that a trained historian can reach beyond the areas of study he dealt with in school. But the extended study of a subject and a close familiarization with sources add unquestioned value to a book.

Graduate education is not the only background that qualifies a writer to address a subject with authority. Neither Barbara Tuchman nor Cornelius Ryan had formal training as historians. Yet they have authored some of the best books written on World War I and the Normandy invasion. Tuchman and Ryan based their books on extensive archival research and, in Ryan's case, hundreds of interviews with participants. For these authors, depth and breadth of research gave every indication that the authors' stories were accurate and their conclusions sound. However, gauging an author's credibility or competency by the size of the footnotes or bibliography in his book is difficult. The reader has to decide whether the writer has looked at enough of the right material to substantiate the text. If the reader is unfamiliar with the subject, he is normally unable to judge the completeness of the research.

The last thing that can reveal the expertise of an author is personal experience. The accuracy and value of Charles MacDonald's *Company Commander* stem largely from his personal experience as a company commander in World War II. He was

able to describe the world of the combat infantry far better than anyone else who had not experienced conflict at that level. MacDonald, as with others who write of their own experiences, is the equivalent of an eyewitness. In a court of law, eyewitness testimony is the most decisive and compelling of all. However, the ability to speak as one who was there does not mean the author is totally reliable. For example, the infantryman who landed on Utah Beach on 6 June 1944 would view the overall Normandy landings in a different light from a comrade who had to claw his way across the sand at Omaha. Similarly, the view of events of a V Corps staff officer would differ from that of a man in the first wave to come ashore. In other words, the value of personal experience can be offset by the limitations of that experience when applied to a broader question.

Researchers and analysts have the same requirement to consider authorship as those reading historical books, monographs, and articles. Reports, memorandums, staff summaries, and the like have authors, and the author's background or experience, proximity to the action, and duty position influence his credibility in preparing these documents. For example, a summary of operations written by one of the participating company commanders would be good, at least for the area that involved that company. A similar summary written by a division staff officer might be a better overall report but would not necessarily be based on personal experience. The further removed from the event by time and distance, the less likely the author's account is completely accurate.

The writer's background, professional training, depth and breadth of research, or personal experience does not determine the value of a written historical work. However, they are indicators the reader or researcher can use to evaluate the historical material in question.

Of equal importance to the author's qualifications is his purpose for writing the material in the first place. Few historical works exist simply to tell a story. Some are an attempt to retell a story in light of new evidence; others are an effort to correct what is perceived to

be errors or incorrect interpretations in earlier works. Memoirs are historical works in which the author tells *his* side of an issue or story. Sometimes, his memoirs are a response to unfavorable treatment in other books or articles.

It is important for a reader to determine an author's purpose, for it can reveal the author's biases or slants. Those advancing a particular point of view marshal all the facts that support their point and often disregard evidence that runs counter to their thesis. Even the most objective historian tends to describe and analyze events through the rose-colored glasses of his own experiences or values. The knowledge of the book's purpose and potential slant allows the reader to place the evidence presented in the appropriate light, possibly disregarding some information due to its obvious bias.

The purpose of a document is normally quite evident, sometimes being stated in the title. Hence, we have "reports" on various topics, "summaries of operations," and "memorandums for the record" on specific issues. Historians generally give greater value to these types of documents as they are supposed to be more objective and have less inherent biases. However, the reader cannot assume that these types of material are totally factual. Army historian Oliver L. Spaulding noted the questionable accuracy of General Zachary Taylor's reports during the Mexican War:

His [Taylor's] reports were written by an acute military student a clever and discreet artist in words; it has been said that they "never lied and never told the truth." In every single battle, from Palo Alto to Buena Vista, the report is so phrased that, while it is difficult to challenge any specific statement of fact, the impression is precisely that one most creditable to the commander. Certain facts are played up, others toned down, still others quietly omitted.*

Unfortunately, Taylor's reports were not the only historical documents written more to reflect favorably on the commander than to report accurately the operations of the command.

*Colonel Oliver L. Spaulding, Books: How to Judge Them and How to Use Them, Lecture delivered at the U.S. Army War College, Washington Barracks, DC, 2 October 1922, 10.

Having established the author's credentials or qualifications and the purpose for writing the text, the reader must evaluate the sources the author used in preparing his book or article. Sources are the equivalent of raw materials and, as such, affect the text just as the quality of the materials used in making a car affect the car's quality. The number and type of sources used in a work reflect directly the breadth and depth of research. If the sources are poor or insufficient to support the book, the value of the book suffers.

Historians place the greatest value on "primary sources," which are reports, personal accounts, interviews, and other written material that are concurrent with the event under study. As variations of the eyewitness category of material, these types of information have great value because they reflect either a firsthand account of an event or action or an interview with a participant. The words and descriptions have not been filtered through the mind of a person distant from the event in space and time. Because of this, historians consider primary sources to be important, if not crucial, to establishing accuracy. However, these materials must be used with caution.

Readers and writers must be careful to distinguish independent accounts from dependent accounts. For example, a battalion commander's report of the location of his companies, his S3 report, and the company commanders' reports are simply variations of the same information. The first two probably depend on the latter's statements. However, if a neighboring battalion commander reports the same information or if captured enemy documents identify companies at those locations, we have independent verification of the companies' positions.

In this respect, the breadth of sources is as important as the type of sources. The description of a battalion's operations cannot be based on a single individual's observations. A soldier sees only a narrow part of an action. His view is physically limited to the area he occupies, and he generally has little firsthand knowledge of what's happening on his flanks or rear. Even the forces opposing

him are a matter of impression. A heavy volume of fire over an extended area might lead him to conclude he is facing a reinforced company or battalion minus. The reality might be a platoon on an extended front with several automatic weapons. Only the enemy's documents or accounts could confirm or invalidate the commander's perception.

Among the most valuable sources a writer can use are official reports and personal accounts, be they in an interview, diary, or published account. However, these items can be extremely misleading if not checked against other reports, messages, orders, and so forth. An author who relies on only one source or one class of sources when others are available to him does not have the complete story. His narrative or analysis should be used with caution.

The need for breadth of sources is even more important when the writer relies on "secondary sources." These items are generally other historical writings, books, and articles that deal with the subject in question. They constitute secondhand information as the primary sources of information have been filtered through the thoughts, impressions, and possibly biases of the writers. In some respects, reports written long after the action or by the successor of the actual commander are more appropriately secondary sources, even though they date from the same general time period. For example, the Secretary of War's Annual Report for 1877, which deals with the Nez Perce campaign, was written long after the conclusion of hostilities and was based on information that had passed through a number of command headquarters.

In the final analysis, the type and breadth of sources is driven largely by the purpose of the work. An author attempting to describe in general terms the history of World War II can use a number of secondary works as the basis for his story. If, however, the purpose is to analyze combat operations for a corps, division, or subordinate units, the author must use as many primary sources

as possible. The depth and accuracy of analysis depends on the depth and breadth of sources.

We have examined the author's qualifications; the purpose for writing the book, article, or document; and the sources used as the basis for that work. The last area for evaluation is the work itself, the body of the book or article. In this assessment, the reader must ultimately answer a two-part question: does the author support his major points, and does the work achieve the purpose or objective for which it was written? Even the simplest statement of purpose or thesis has several supporting ideas or elements. Much like a piece of furniture, if too many of these supporting "legs" are absent or not well constructed, the whole thing falls apart. The reader must decide if the key supporting arguments or concepts are validated by evidence and whether there are enough supporting arguments to support the author's main idea. Finally, if the book or written work does not achieve the author's intended purpose, the author has failed. The author's inability to support his major points or to achieve his goal is much like a commander failing to carry out his mission.

The reader must be cautious, however, not to make an all-or-nothing, good-or-bad judgment about the material as a whole. There are often jewels of historical facts, stories, or important insights even in the worst publications. A reader should be sensitive to these and credit the author with some contribution, even if it is by accident. This goes back to the basic premise that a reader can neither accept at face value all that an author says nor reject it totally.

The Evaluation Process

The actual process of evaluating historical material has three phases. In the first phase, the preliminary assessment, the reader determines the qualifications of the author, establishes the purpose of the book, and surveys the sources used. Beginning the

evaluation with the preliminary phase has the additional benefit of possibly saving the reader some time.

Most readers take several hours to digest a book of 400 to 500 pages. Given the requirements of the job, the need to spend time with the family, and other social or community obligations, few soldiers have more than an hour or two each evening, if that, for professional or leisure reading. If a history book proves to be of little value, the reader has probably wasted a number of hours. Therefore, a preliminary evaluation can give the user some idea of whether the book will justify the investment in time that will be required.

The preliminary analysis begins with the title page, which tells the reader the title, author, place and date of publication, and the name of the publisher. The title gives the general subject of the book and can indicate the purpose of the book. However, titles can be misleading. A number of authors who have no difficulty in writing hundreds of pages of text struggle with a few words in the title. Failing to match title with subject can lead the reader to expect something he will not get. A glance at the book's table of contents should give a closer approximation of the book's true coverage. Since there are few tables of contents for articles, the reader must trust the author's judgment and choice of words. As a rule, the reader will find out quickly if the title and actual subject of the article are mismatched. In most cases, the titles of most documents are normally accurate and often identify the purpose of the material. A "summary of operations" is a narrative that has as its purpose the concise description of what a unit or organization did.

Publication information is of mixed value. Experienced historians know the major publishing companies with reputations for printing quality works. These firms often refer manuscripts to other historians for comments and recommendations on whether to print them or not. The average reader, however, seldom has this much familiarity with publishers. The date of publication, however, can

provide some information. A book on World War II, written by a participant and published shortly after the war, would have some advantages. The memories of that participant are comparatively fresh, and the author may still have contact and collaboration with the men he served with. On the other hand, the reader should exercise caution when reading a similar book written thirty years after the war. The converse may be true of a historian's work on the same subject. A history of that war written in the early 1950s could not have contained information that was still classified. Thirty years later, that material is probably much more available. Recently, several books on the Enigma and Ultra secrets have appeared, and these books simply could not have been written twenty years ago.

Authorship is the final point to examine on the title page. Again, the objective is to determine the author's qualifications, and there are several ways to do this. The book's dust jacket provides some information, most often describing the author in the most flattering terms. This must be taken with a few grains of salt. At a minimum, the jacket will give the reader some idea of the author's educational background, work experience, and other published books. Other sources that often comment on an author's professional background are reviews of the book that are published in professional journals and periodicals such as *Book Review Digest*. In a number of ways, book reviews provide an invaluable source of information on a publication. A dictionary of authors or a guide to scholars gives such information as education, previous job experience, and other published works, sometimes including articles. Once more, the reader must be cautious not to place too much stock in academic degrees or the number of books written. Virtually anyone, given enough time, can write several bad books. The value of personal experience must be determined in association with the book's subject and purpose.

If the work is a book, the next step in the preliminary assessment is to glance at the preface. Quite often, the author will state his reasons for writing the book and also include some discussion of his use of sources. The statement of purpose or thesis is important

to note, even to the extent of writing it down. If the item under scrutiny is an article, the reader should look at its first few paragraphs. Good writers will have their thesis statement somewhere in the beginning of the work. When dealing with documents, be they report summaries or analyses, the title of a document generally states the purpose of the material. Once more, the purpose is important because the reader must ultimately determine if the author achieved his goal.

The final step in the preliminary evaluation, that dealing with sources, takes the reader to the bibliography. Here, the reader examines the number and types of sources used. Given the author's subject and purpose, the reader must decide whether the author has the right kind of sources and enough of them to address the topic adequately. The reader should beware of a flaw of some historians, which is to "pad" the bibliography—that is, adding a number of books or articles that the author did not consult in order to give the appearance of extensive research. Readers can check this by quickly comparing the chapter footnotes with the bibliography. The footnotes identify what sources the author *actually* used in his book or article. In the actual reading of the text, the reader will get an even clearer picture of the kind of sources the author examined or should have examined.

If, after the preliminary evaluation, the reader decides that the book, article, or other material is worth the time to read, he begins the second part of the evaluation, the concurrent evaluation phase. Throughout this process, the individual must read critically and look for the author's proof of his key points. However, the reader must also be as objective in weighing the author's key points and conclusions as he expects the author to be in amassing the evidence.

A particularly useful technique a reader can use during the concurrent evaluation phase is nothing more than maintaining a small notebook for jotting down the overall purpose of the work, interesting points in the text, questions, and so forth. Without a

notebook, the reader must rely on his memory to answer basic questions. If an individual reads other books or articles on the same subject, the collected notes can be used to determine areas of conflict or agreement. Some who have done considerable professional reading have organized these notes according to subjects, such as leadership, tactics, logistics, and so on.

The concurrent evaluation process has two parts. First, while the reader is moving through the text, he must stop from time to time to ask some basic questions:

- Is the material I am reading appropriate to the subject of the book or article? Some authors tend to wander off the path and add material that has little relation to the subject. In many cases, they found a particularly interesting story or point and put it in the text even though it is irrelevant.
- Has the author supported his main points with references to sources or by logic? A book or article without footnotes is a minefield. Useful information of insight may be found in it, but the danger of error, misunderstanding, and bias is unquestioned. The reader should, in short, expect the author to prove his points using as many independent sources as possible.
- Is there anything the writer should be addressing in this section or chapter that he has not? If there are questions the text raises, the reader should jot them down in his notebook. Successive paragraphs or chapters may address them later. If not, the reader should note this in his final evaluation of the book or article.

The second part of the concurrent evaluation process occurs when the reader has finished the book, article, or document. The reader must decide whether the author achieved his purpose or objective in writing the item and determine whether the author adequately supported his position or interpretation of events with the right kind and number of supporting sources. By answering

these questions, the reader actually determines the value of the historical material he has read. Even if the item has little value overall, the reader must objectively decide if there are good points or ideas in the text.

The final assessment of a historical work takes place over time. The subsequent evaluation of a book occurs when it is measured against other books or articles on the same subject. A reader interested in a facet of history, be it a battle or a dimension of warfare such as logistics or leadership, cannot develop a full understanding from a single book. He must look at other interpretations or studies, much as a writer must consult a number of sources to get the clearest understanding of what took place or why. The reader should expect to see differences in authors' opinions and possible disagreement over what took place. In the end, he must decide which writer best proves his case.

The notebook that was mentioned earlier is invaluable in this process. Few readers have the ability to remember the key points of several books on the same subject. After a while, the reader would be hard pressed to say who wrote what. A glance at his notebook will often refresh his memory and help him weigh the comparative value of what he has read.

In the evaluation process, the reader must be cautious not to commit three mistakes:

- First, the best books are not necessarily the ones that agree with the reader's preconceived ideas about a subject. The best historical works might actually be those that challenge the reader's assumptions and force him to reevaluate his own beliefs or opinions.
- Second, a reader must be careful in comparing books with different purposes. A general history of World War II has different structure and source requirements from a text that analyzes infantry operations in the same war. Similarly, the

criteria by which we gauge “qualified” authors may be different for these two texts.

- Finally, the reader must remember that newer does not necessarily mean better. Books referred to as “classics” have stood the test of time. The interpretations or descriptions found in military history classics have remained sound even in light of the discovery of new information.

Reading and studying history can be of immense value to the professional soldier. History can provide the kind of insights into battle, leadership, tactics, and so forth that could not otherwise be gained. Even combat experience is limited to the circumstances of particular battles and the level of military operations that existed at the time. For example, those blooded in Vietnam know well that kind of war. However, those experiences would be of a limited value if applied to the mechanized war that happened in 1944 on the plains of Germany. History allows the soldier to learn from the actions of soldiers as distant in time as the Greeks and Persians and as close as the British in the Falklands.

Unfortunately, a soldier must invest some time to benefit from the experiences of those who have come before him. The key is to make that time as productive as possible. Getting the absolute most out of the books that are read is productive. The ability to evaluate historical materials, whether they are read or used in research and analysis, enhances the basic value of the material itself. These techniques can assist the soldier in learning about his profession and what that profession must be able to do in time of war.

The following works can assist a reader in understanding the nature of historical materials and the best way to use them:

Barzun, Jacques and Henry Graff. *The Modern Researcher*. 4th edition. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1985.

Cantor, Norman F., and Richard I. Schneider. *How to Study History*. Arlington Heights, IL: AHS Publishing Corporation, 1967.

Johnson, Allen. *The Historian and Historical Evidence*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926.

Gray, Wood, et al. *Historian Handbook: A Key to the Study and Writing of History*. 2d edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1964.

Elton, G. R. *The Practice of History*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1967.