

Why Culture Matters: Lessons from History

Culture Corner



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Editor's Note: This column is a follow-on to the Culture Corner column published in the April–June 2020 issue of Military Intelligence Professional Bulletin.

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.
—Sun Tzu

Introduction

The United States has often favored a decisive military engagement in which a strategic or operational victory destroys our enemy or renders it combat ineffective. Some of our decisive military engagements have eliminated threats and helped build and protect our country, people, and interests. However, in any operational environment, a military engagement or series of decisive engagements may not always be the best path to achieving our long-term goals. Military operations should be built on an in-depth understanding of the cultural, social, economic, and political realities of the environment. The beliefs, perceptions, lifestyles, and economic foundations of the society influence the operational environment and will affect planning and execution. Further, it is important to monitor the perceptions and reactions of the population, as these factors affect current and future operations.

Cultural awareness is an essential component of the Army's four strategic roles to shape operational environments, prevent conflict, conduct large-scale ground combat operations, and consolidate gains. It can also play a role in self-awareness, giving us a better assessment of our own strengths and areas for improvement. It can help us anticipate allied and enemy actions on the battlefield, as well as second- and third-order effects that allow us to better determine, plan for, and execute the next operation and

help shape overall strategy. Moreover, applying cultural awareness can help commanders and their staffs to achieve greater situational awareness.

This article discusses some valuable cultural and situational awareness lessons from World Wars I and II.

- ◆ Russia/Soviet Union and Germany in World Wars I and II (need for accurate assessments of allies and adversaries).
- ◆ Pacific theater in World War II (tactical-level application).
- ◆ Post-World War II Japan (application of cultural awareness).

World War I—Russia and Germany

The March Revolution of 1917 resulted in the overthrow of Czar Nicholas II and the end of centuries of czarist rule in Russia. The Allied Powers (France, England, and United States) assumed that the new “democratic” Russia would become a more effective ally in the war against the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria).¹ However, Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks took control of the government, and in March 1918 signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, a peace treaty with Germany, taking Russia out of the war and conceding vast lands in Eastern Europe to the Germans. The treaty also freed up approximately one million German troops who could turn west and focus their efforts on fighting a one-front war against the Allied Powers. This had been facilitated in no small part by the Germans, who transported the revolutionary leader Lenin from exile in Switzerland back home to Russia in the hopes he could eventually remove Russia from the war against Germany. The Germans' analysis of the situation and their cultural awareness—which included their knowledge of revolutionary Russia's cultural landscape—proved accurate and effective.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

In March 1917, demonstrations in Russia culminated in the abdication of Czar Nicholas II and the appointment of a weak provisional government that shared power with the Petrograd Soviet socialists. This arrangement led to confusion and chaos both at the front and at home, with the Russian army becoming increasingly ineffective. Discontent and the weaknesses of the provisional government led to a rise in the popularity of the Bolshevik Party led by Vladimir Lenin, which demanded an immediate end to the war. The Bolsheviks came to power and signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918. The treaty was effectively terminated in November 1918 when Germany surrendered to the Allies.²

This historical example demonstrates the need to have an accurate assessment of one's allies and adversaries. In this case, the Allied Powers were not culturally aware of the severe impact the revolution had had on the Russian people and their renewed priorities. Although Lenin had openly stated he would withdraw Russia from the war, the Allied Powers did not anticipate the success and staying power of the Bolsheviks, which was not the most widely supported party in the tumultuous period after the March Revolution. In addition to needing a better situational awareness, a greater cultural understanding would have aided the Allied Powers in anticipating the Bolshevik success and withdrawal of Russia, a major ally, from the war. Cultural awareness would have included knowing the average Russian's needs, hopes, fears, anger, and mistrust of anybody and anything evocative of traditional authority figures (i.e., anything reminiscent of the czarist era). The Allied Powers would also have benefited from an accurate assessment of the competing elements' motivation and resolve, for example, Germany's grasp of Russia's renewed (revolutionary) mindset and Germany's intent to capitalize on it.

World War II—Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union

World War I ended in 1918. A mere 21 years later, cultural awareness would have once again helped the Allied Powers to foresee events in Russia, by then part of the Soviet Union. Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were openly intense enemies because of their political and ethnic ideology, history, and national ambitions. However, Germany and the Soviet Union shocked much of the world when they signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in August 1939, which declared a state of nonaggression between the two countries and a promise not to aid an enemy of the other. Some observers—those who understood the contemporary circumstances and Russian culture—were not surprised. They knew that Russia desired a physical buffer zone between its vast west-

ern plains and Western Europe. Russia based this desire on its geographical awareness and a legacy of invasions by the English, French, and Germans. Astute observers also understood that England's and France's unwillingness to include the Soviet Union in the Munich talks was significant. The talks, which resulted in the Munich Agreement, allowed Hitler to take over the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia. To the Soviet government, not being included in the talks was an indication of the capitalist powers' mistrust of communist Russia. To the Russian people, who culturally placed a great value on strong, unwavering leadership, the Munich Agreement also represented the weakness of the English and French governments in dealing with Hitler.

The Munich Agreement (Annexation of the Sudetenland)

By May 1938, Hitler and his generals were planning to occupy Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovaks were relying on military assistance from France, with which they had an alliance. The Soviet Union also had a treaty with Czechoslovakia, and it indicated willingness to cooperate with France and Great Britain if they decided to come to Czechoslovakia's defense; however, the Soviet Union was ignored throughout the crisis. The Munich Agreement, signed in September 1938, was a settlement reached by Germany, Great Britain, France, and Italy that permitted German annexation of the Sudetenland, in western Czechoslovakia.³

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact

In August 1939, enemies Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, in which the two countries agreed to take no military action against each other for the next 10 years. With Europe on the brink of another major war, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin viewed the pact as a way to keep his nation on peaceful terms with Germany, while giving him time to build up the Soviet military. Adolf Hitler used the pact to make sure Germany was able to invade Poland unopposed. Germany unilaterally terminated the pact in June 1941 when it launched Operation Barbarossa.⁴

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was instrumental to the start of World War II, which began with Germany's invasion of Poland from the west and, a few weeks later, the Soviet Union's invasion of Poland from the east. With the pact in place, Germany could turn its full attentions to invading Western Europe, and the Soviet Union was free to dominate the Baltic States and invade Finland. For those among the Allied Powers who did not have a cultural and situational awareness, this nonaggression pact left them again unprepared for the consequences of losing a potential ally.

Then, in June 1941, the situation changed. Ignoring the terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Hitler launched the massive Operation Barbarossa against the Soviets with the goal of conquering the western Soviet Union for a variety of

ideological reasons.⁵ Stalin had ignored repeated warnings that Germany was likely to invade and ordered no full-scale mobilization of forces even though the mobilization was ongoing.⁶ Although Hitler had anticipated a quick victory within a few months, Operation Barbarossa was seriously flawed and resulted in Germany having to fight a prolonged two-front war.

This historical example demonstrates the need to have an accurate assessment of one's allies and adversaries. Even though Stalin was aware of Hitler's erratic personality and ambitious plans, he still entered into the nonaggression pact to secure a breathing space of immunity from German attack. "Red flag" indicators were there from the beginning, including the Nazis' anti-Slavic racism, the Nazis' potential interest in the Soviets' rich oil resources, and Hitler's well-known desire to obtain *lebensraum*, or "living space," for the Germans at the expense of the Slavic people.⁷

World War II—Pacific Theater

When fighting began in the Pacific theater during World War II, most Americans did not know about a strong Japanese military ethos—that surrendering was akin to what Americans would consider morally disgusting. Though the Samurai era had ended, that same historical sense of "death before dishonor" was present among most levels of the Japanese military; this sense of "saving face" was, and to some extent still is, a core part of civilian Japanese culture. To surrender rather than fight to the death was analo-

gous to dishonoring the emperor, denying the unique and superior spirit of the Japanese over all others, and embracing shame and cowardice. Greater awareness and dissemination of this knowledge among the American rank and file might have led to some Americans not losing their lives attempting to take Japanese prisoners earlier in the war. This might have also helped American Soldiers and Marines in making decisions about surrendering, knowing that the Japanese would consider prisoners not only foreign enemies but also reprehensible, dishonorable, and something to be treated as less than human. It was a hard lesson in combat cultural awareness that Americans learned very quickly during World War II.

The Reconstruction of Japan after World War II

After World War II, the United States led the Allies in the occupation and rehabilitation of the Japanese state. In September 1945, GEN Douglas MacArthur took charge of the Supreme Command of Allied Powers and began the work of rebuilding Japan. This included widespread military, political, economic, and social reforms.⁸

While sometimes criticized for his handling of the Korean War, GEN MacArthur made brilliant use of cultural awareness to both consolidate gains and shape the strategic environment after America's defeat of Japan in World War II. Recognizing that the Japanese emperor represented Japanese culture and tradition, as well as the highest focal point of stability for a deeply hierarchical society, he allowed the emperor to retain his place in Japanese society. In this way, GEN MacArthur worked through the Japanese system and supplanted it—proclaiming that the largely United States-written post-war Japanese constitution, officially "approved" by the emperor, was Japanese in origin. Even by running post-war Japan from his isolated office, and rarely making public appearances, he used the familiar cultural image of the emperor, who before the war had been similarly inaccessible and perceived by the public as a nearly unknowable, mysterious figure of unquestioned power. Yet at the same time, GEN MacArthur also symbolically asserted his power by being the face of Japan's American conquerors, as illustrated by his casual dwarfing of Japanese Emperor Hirohito in their famous photograph together. This



Photo courtesy of the German Armed Forces

At the new border between the Third Reich and Soviet Union, September 17, 1939.

combination of upholding and reinforcing a traditional cultural role while simultaneously filling it, in part with an extremely untraditional person, was successful, as GEN MacArthur was relatively popular with the Japanese populace, and his actions solidified Japan as an American ally even today.



U.S. Army photo by LT Gaetano Fallace

GEN MacArthur and Emperor Hirohito at their first meeting, at the U.S. Embassy, Tokyo, 27 September 1945.

The Story Behind the Photo

In September 1945, Emperor Hirohito visited GEN Douglas MacArthur at the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo. During the visit, they posed for a photo that shocked the Japanese public. Up to 1945, the emperor had been a remote, mysterious figure to his people, rarely seen in public, whose photographs were always taken from a certain angle to make him look taller and more impressive than he really was. No Japanese photographer would have taken such a photo of the emperor being overshadowed by GEN MacArthur. The general intended the photo as a message to the emperor about who was going to be the senior partner in their relationship.⁹

In this culturally adept manner, GEN MacArthur consolidated American gains in Japan after World War II. At the same time, he both shaped the region politically and strategically by making Japan a key ally during the Cold War and,

on an operational level, by creating a base of operations for America's military involvement in Asia, which included large-scale combat operations in the Korean War.

Conclusion

As illustrated by these examples, and by the myriad battles, operations, and wars throughout the centuries, history has shown us repeatedly the rewards of applying cultural awareness, which in turn can help achieve situational awareness, and the lethal consequences of ignoring it. When deciding whether large-scale combat operations can best achieve our macro objectives, cultural and situational awareness should be an important factor. While the decision may ultimately be the call of civilian-political leadership, military doctrine makes it clear that the armed forces are involved in this process and its implementation. ✨

Epigraph

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Endnotes

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