

PROFESSOR SIR HEW STRACHAN INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Max Easterman

My name's Max Easterman and it's my pleasure to introduce you to the Goethe Institut's latest pair of DOPPELGÄNGER. It's a great way for you to learn about the way Britons and Germans live and work today. Each time we interview two people from the same profession in each country – someone in the UK who's worked in Germany and someone from Germany who's worked in this country in the same job.

Our Doppelgänger focus this time is on HISTORIANS.

Historians are in the limelight at the moment because 2014 is a year of great anniversaries: 75 years since the outbreak of the Second World War, 25 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and exactly 300 years since the Hanoverians came to the throne, since when the British monarchy has been, well, yes, German. Their German name was changed to Windsor in 1917, during the First World War. And 2014 is also the centenary of the outbreak of that conflict. We've had a whole raft of new books on the First World War, new analysis, new perspectives. But the war has turned the spotlight back on the historians and the fact that they have never been able to achieve and still can't achieve consensus on how and why the war broke out.

Sir Hew Strachan is Professor of the History of War at All Souls College in Oxford. He was born in Edinburgh and went to Cambridge University, where he's still a Fellow of Corpus Christi College. He's been a merchant seaman and a lecturer at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. He's the author of the Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War and has written about Clausewitz and German strategy in the First World War, so he knows both sides of that coin. He's also a member of the World War 1 Centenary Advisory Board. Sir Hew, can I begin by asking you about being a historian and specifically a historian of Germany. What's the fascination with Germany?

Hew Strachan

Well, I'm a military historian and sadly for Germany, particularly given where Germany stands today and its position in relation to war, war is pretty important in understanding Germany. It's also important to the understanding of war. It's very hard, I think, to be an adequate military historian at least in the European context without engaging with Germany. It's so important for 19th and 20th century military thought, so important in terms of being seen as the leading military power and therefore other countries emulate it. I don't really think you can get inside modern military history without engaging with Germany.

Max Easterman

Clausewitz effectively wrote the Urtext on military strategy...is what he wrote back in the 19th-century as relevant now as it was then?

Hew Strachan

Yes, it's one of his, I think, immense strengths. The more I read Clausewitz, the more I admire the man. I don't think he is a very likeable man, but, you know, his wife loved him dearly, but he is utterly focused on the debate. When I'm being flippant, which is quite frequently, I will tend to say that if he was still alive, he would still be writing that book, because the book is a constant debate with the evidence that he finds. And every time he came against a problem, he would use military history, he would go back, dig around and say: "how does reading military history help us understand what this particular problem, strategy is?" And it's precisely that debate, that reluctance to come to conclusions – although he did want to come to conclusions – but it's that reluctance to come to a premature, flip conclusion, which makes him so profound.

Max Easterman

Is there a reluctance amongst historians today to draw lessons from history – such as from the events of the 1st World War?

Hew Strachan

Yes, I think there is. Lessons are not something historians do, because we would all argue that what happens in a particular period is particular to that period, it's not reproduceable. That doesn't mean history doesn't have a didactic value. What history does, I think, is generate understanding, which is a different thing. It also, I think, has, particularly in less literate societies than Britain and Germany, has an

immediacy that in a funny old way we've lost contact with. I think the printed word has created a distance I think we almost create too much distance from the past to our present. So it's that sense of context, which I think is also important. "Who are we?" – well, history is quite important also in answering that question. It's a different question from "Are there lessons to be learned?"

Max Easterman

Isn't the 1st World War a classic example of how historians cannot reach a consensus? I'm thinking of the revisionists and anti-revisionists in the 1920s, for example.

Hew Strachan

That is absolutely true and that is, of course, one of its fascinations. It's also why the war is a great didactic tool in its own right, because controversy is very good for educational purposes. It's one of the reasons we should be pleased about the attention to the centenary as historians, because the controversies will provide an educational tool. By the 1930s the argument about German war guilt had, broadly speaking, been put to bed in most quarters. Most people did accept the version that Europe had slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war, as Lloyd George said. That view held until Fritz Fischer publishes books in 1961, even in 1962 for most English speaking historians and certainly somebody like John F. Kennedy in the middle of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, Europe had still slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war. Fischer gradually gained ground, German war guilt was therefore re-established as a form of consensus and now we are back again to the 1930s position. And even if you are a diehard defender of the argument that Germany is responsible for causing this war, that in itself is insufficient to explain the war's outbreak.

Max Easterman

Here in Britain we tend to reflect on the 1st World War though Remembrance Day - the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month. Now, you've written that "2014 must not be Remembrance Sunday writ large". What did you mean by that?

Hew Strachan

Because the day on which we commemorate the dead all since 1914 is the day on which, for Britain, the First World War ended, or at least the war with Germany ended – let's be clear, the whole war doesn't end in November 1918 – because we do all that, we have continued to carry the First World War in our Remembrance baggage ever since that war. It is therefore very easy, when we get to the anniversary of that war to make those symbols the continuing way, in which we commemorate it. That does also confusing things to us, because Remembrance Sunday is not just about the First World War now. It's a funny old mixture of sort of patriotic sentiment, respect for the dead of the war, believing that these were good wars – because we don't have Germany's problem in confronting our past, we have elected not to confront our past on this – believing that we should be sorry for all the dead in all wars. We haven't quite decided whose side we are on in Remembrance Sunday. So it can carry all that baggage. Now that seems to be quite a long way from the First World War specifically itself. And furthermore if we use that as the, sort of, dominant motif for a four year commemoration then we are simply going to become very bored. So I think it has to be about more than that. And particularly for 2014 it has to be about more than that, because when the war broke out, although people were shocked, surprised, apprehensive, uncertain, they had no idea what was going to happen to them. And if we use Remembrance Sunday as the vehicle by which we approach the commemoration of the outbreak of the war, then we won't be anywhere near where they were when they went off to war.

Max Easterman

The Germans confront their past, they call it Vergangenheitsbewältigung...why is it the Germans have done this and we have not?

Hew Strachan

There is a very straightforward answer to that and it is the Third Reich, it is a question of whether there is collective German responsibility for the Nazis and for the Holocaust. There is a continuous narrative that really begins with Frederick the Great's Prussia that sees the army as essential and the use of military power essential to the assertion of Prussia as a Central European state. And, after all, it is essentially surrounded by land frontiers and by possible enemies. The army has to be essential to the formation of the state and it is through war that Germany is both unified in 1871 and through war that Germany expands in the 20th century. And the First World War is part of that narrative that ends in Berlin in 1945. In confronting that Germany is asking real question about how it got where it is today.

Max Easterman

How did the First World War then change Germany's view of war as an essential military tool for, if you like, maintaining the nation?

Hew Strachan

Not as much as it should have done, is the short answer. Partly, of course, because the army engineers the revolution from above, so called. In other words it itself gets rid of the Kaiser. The Kaiser doesn't topple through a democratic process, which is what Woodrow Wilson, the American president, had hoped would happen. It therefore is able, it – the army, is able to argue after 1919 that it hadn't lost the war on the Western Front, because it was still standing on French territory when the war ended. And it was able to argue that the reputation Germany had for military prowess was therefore unbroken. It's extraordinary in many ways if you look at the 1920s and 1930s that Germany – reduced to an army of 100 thousand men by the Treaty of Versailles - that Germany is still seeing war as one of the ways it might defend itself. It really hasn't fully come to terms with the notion that this may be the war to end all wars.

Max Easterman

You wrote recently that we in Britain have "parochial preoccupations with the mud of the Western Front" – What do you mean by that?

Hew Strachan

I'm concerned that our approach to this war is still very nationally determined, that we find it very hard to raise our eyes above the British experience and that means in most people's understanding the experience of the Western Front, although British servicemen and women served in many other parts of the world and, of course, did many other things than to serve in the army. We tend to forget that there were people in Royal Navy, people in Gallipoli, people in Mesopotamia, people fighting in East Africa. So there isn't one experience of this war, but we've allowed one experience to colour it. And the Western Front that we are concerned with runs only as far as the Somme. Champagne, Verdun, Vosges – they don't figure, they are not part of our understanding. And there is almost a genuine surprise when you say something staggeringly obvious about the French or German or Austro-Hungarian experience, because it's different, or it might be different, or it might be similar, but there isn't an awareness of that. What I would hope is the four year centenary is an opportunity for us to widen our approach. So far there is no sign of that happening.

Putting it another way round, 88 per cent of those who put on a uniform in the British Armed Forces between 1914 and 1918 came back from this war. In other words the majority, the vast majority survived this war. Of course it depended on which part of the army, which front you served on, if you were in Infantry on the Western Front your chances of survival were much less, if you were Royal Flying Corps Pilot – even less than that. The point is, when somebody says, I hear it said very often: "my great-grandfather was one of the lucky ones, he came home", actually that's true of most of us who are alive today: our great-grandfathers came home, because otherwise we wouldn't be here

Max Easterman

British historians have arguments about the 1st World War...German historians have arguments about the 1st World War But do you have arguments with German historians about the First World War?

Hew Strachan

Yes actually I've had a few arguments. One of the things about German historians and study of war is because it has been inherently very difficult, it's been much easier for British historians to study war and to study the First World War than it has been for Germans, because Germans come with more baggage to their own experience of war and we come at it from outside. It's also been in a way liberating for me, because one of my concerns as an academic military historian in Britain is that as we Brits become more monoglot and particularly my students become more monoglot, they are far less able to engage with what I would call comparative military history. War, you know, is a reciprocal business; it's not just fought by one country. You can't write military history from the perspective, in my understanding, of one country. We talk about an army and its relation to parent society, but you can't talk about battle, campaigns, wars without engaging with interaction with the enemy. For me, working above all on the First World War, it's incredibly liberating and enlightening and exciting to engage with the literature of not only Germany, but also of France. It's a truism that I am sure you are aware of that it doesn't require much reading in another language to suddenly realise that you are in a very different place. And that's vital.

Max Easterman

Do you travel frequently to Germany and does being there give you a different perspective on German history?

Hew Strachan

Yes, I go a lot and I do, so the answer is yes to both questions. I have the military history research office – I never remember the new German title, because it's just been reinvented, but what used to be the Militärgeschichtliche Forschungsamt, now in Potsdam, which is part of the Bundeswehr, of course, rather than part of an academic institution, rather than a university. It is an institution that I have a great deal to do with and I'm on the Editorial Board of their journal. In terms of the organisation of conferences and so on within the German academic world they tend to take the principal role. So, yes, I go a lot, yes, I learn a lot in the process.

Max Easterman

Hew Strachan, thank you very much indeed.

Hew Strachan

Thank you.