Lessons from Second World War anthropology

Peripheral, persuasive and ignored contributions

Antropologists were largely called upon to contribute their specialized knowledge to the war effort. The nature of the contacts they had established with native peoples the world over and the methods they had developed for understanding varied modes of life permitted them to give realistic aid to intelligence units, or to those carrying on economic and psychological warfare and to advise concerning many types of postwar programs of rehabilitation. ‘Anthropology 1944’ Britannica Book of the Year 1944

The well established links between anthropologists and colonialism documented in the work of scholars like Talal Asad, Kathleen Gough, Dell Hymes, Adam Kuper and George Stocking stand in marked contrast with the sparse analysis of anthropological contributions to the wars of the 20th century. The latter reflects certain professional concerns of ethics, historically inevitable blind spots associated with the analysis of recent events, and the problems arising from critical evaluation of the actions of living and recently deceased anthropological elders.

While some anthropologists and historians have discussed various aspects of anthropological contributions to warfare, these periodic examinations tend to focus more on the specifics of particular military or intelligence campaigns, while the larger issues embedded in anthropological contributions to warfare are often downplayed. But downplayed or not, these contributions raise serious questions concerning the ethical implications of using cultural knowledge and anthropological knowledge in the waging of war, and reveal fundamental symbiotic links between scholars and state.

Twentieth-century anthropologists applied their knowledge and ethnographic skills to warfare on many occasions, fighting with both books and guns. Such uses of anthropology in the past have been problematic, and the possibility of similar actions today raises a number of complex ethical and practical issues – issues that cannot be properly addressed until anthropologists confront the nature and scope of past anthropological contributions to warfare. America’s sudden declaration of ‘war on terror’ finds most anthropologists with little understanding of the ways that anthropologists opposed or contributed to the wars of the last century. This article briefly describes the nature and scope of anthropological contributions to the Second World War in order to provide some critical historical basis for evaluating the meaning and dangers of current and future military-intelligence uses of anthropology. The applications of anthropology in Asia, Europe and the Americas during World War II raised fundamental ethical issues and led to a variety of intended and unintended outcomes. The discussion below describes some of the ways that anthropological analysis was used and ignored by the military, and how some of the most effective anthropological contributions to the war were directed not against foreign foes, but at the practices of military policy makers.

The decisions and actions of anthropologists during World War II and other past wars must be viewed in the historical context of their times. The international anthropological community needs to be aware of past anthropological contributions to war, and we need to critically evaluate these past activities not in order to criticize past anthropologists, but to help provide a framework for coping with present and future pressures for anthropologists to contribute to military and intelligence operations. While past wartime anthropological decisions may be seen as appropriate for their times, the context of contemporary wars raises many more complex and problematic issues.

WWII: Anthropological warfare comes of age

The First World War brought a significant anthropological showdown, with implications for the wars that followed. This was the American Anthropological Association’s (AAA) censure of Franz Boas after he criticized four anthropologists who had used their professional positions as covers for espionage in Central America (Stocking 1968). To this day a general discomfort and ambivalence remains among AAA policy bodies concerning the merging of anthropology, espionage, covert research and warfare. While a number of anthropologists and sociologists applied their skills in support of the First World War, it was the Second World War that brought the widespread application of anthropology to the practice of warfare.

As the Second World War engulfed the world in a state of total war, motivations of nationalism, internationalism, racial supremacy and anti-totalitarianism led a variety of anthropologists into battle both as citizens and citizen-as-antropologist-soldiers. In this war social scientists were harnessed at new levels as analysts, propagandists, foot soldiers, officers and spies. They directed their efforts at populations both within and outside the boundaries of their nations.

The links between German anthropologists and the Nazi regime remain contested. After the war, some German anthropologists maintained that they had resisted contributing to Nazi goals. For example, in 1946 Franz Termer argued that during the war many German anthropologists had recognized that German anthropology...was in danger of becoming a servant of colonial propaganda. The wisest among us saw the danger and protected themselves against it. They did their best to have museums and research overlooked as otherwise might not have been the case. (Termer, quoted in Métraux 1948:717)

Robert Proctor’s work on Nazi anthropology finds that ‘anthropology as a profession fared rather well under the Nazis’, and points out that there were few German anthropologists who opposed the officially sanctioned views of racial science (Proctor 1988:166). With the exception of isolated individuals such as Karl Sailer, few wartime German anthropologists opposed Nazi views of race and anthropology, and Proctor found ‘disturbingly little evidence that anthropologists resisted the expulsion of Jews...
from Germany’ (Proctor 1988:164). As Michael Burleigh’s study of the German Ostforschers’ contributions to the Nazi campaigns established,

No one asked these scholars to put their knowledge at the service of the government: they did so willingly and enthusiastically... Deportations, resettlements, repatriations and mass murder were not sudden visitations from on high, requiring the adoption of some commensurate inscrutable, quasi-religious meta-language, but the result of the exact, modern, ‘scientific’ encompassing of persons with card indexes, card-sorting machines, charts, graphs, maps and diagrams. (Burleigh 1988:8)

In post-war Germany there was a rethinking of such science in the service of war. In 1950 W.E. Muhllmann ‘cautioned against the use of anthropology by “the total state” for political purposes’ – a concern that reaches beyond the impact of WWII Germany to all states engaged in struggles of total war (Proctor 1988:169).

There were also non-German anthropologists promoting racial hierarchies or eugenics that were aligned with Nazi views. Some continental and American anthropologists’ support of eugenics and resistance to adapting a Boasian view of race can be seen within this continuum. E.A. Hooton went so far as to suggest that a national human breeding bureau that would determine which Americans should be allowed to breed and which should be sterilized (FBI WFO 62-73410).


8. Taylor was hand-picked by Paul Linebarger to direct all operations in Asia. Paul Linebarger was a Johns Hopkins-trained political scientists who, at war’s end, drew upon his experiences at OWI to write the book on what he termed ‘psychological warfare’ and to work covertly with the CIA (see Linebarger’s 1948 Psychological warfare, Washington, DC: Infantry Press). Later Linebarger, publishing under the pen-name of Cordwainer Smith, became one of the most influential writers of science fiction’s golden age.


10. The analysis of some contemporary scholars, however, suggests that the impact of American anthropologists on wartime and post-war Japan have been somewhat overstated (see Janssens 1995 and 1999, Neubir and Goldman 1998).

American wartime anthropology applications

Like other citizens, many American anthropologists enlisted in military and intelligence work out of a sense of patriotic duty combined with a belief that military action was the only way to stop the spread of Nazism, fascism and colonial militarism in Asia. That anthropology should be used to fight such a total war was a natural response for most anthropologists of this period.

Some American anthropologists were reluctant to use anthropology, or their professional associations, as instruments of war. Fred Eggan reported that in late 1941 some members of the AAA had unsuccessfully tried to use the Association to organize support for the war effort. During this meeting, however, the council declined to set up a national committee on the use of anthropologists in World War II, which four members in Seattle had recommended, saying that centralization and government backing might lead many members to think the Association was an agent for propaganda (US National Anthropological Archives, Eggan to Ray, 25 January 1942).

But such reservations were easily overcome. Despite
To quote that Dr. MEAD is very highly educated, bears a most excellent reputation, is very well thought of by her associates, and bears an admirable reputation as an anthropologist. Dr. MEAD is very much alert and interested in everything that goes on but is not politically minded in connection with political parties and has never expressed any political views to her knowledge.

Highly recommends Dr. MEAD as being a fine anthropologist and would not hesitate to say that she is a loyal and patriotic American and the work she undertook to accomplish. She volunteered the information that she is sure that Dr. MEAD belongs to no subversive organizations.

A portion of Margaret Mead's FBI era loyalty background investigation conducted by the FBI. Mead's FBI file spans the years from 1941 until her death in 1978 and is 992 pages in length.


Barkan, E. 1988. Mobilizing politics of truth and Psychology. National Research Council, 2101 Constitution Avenue, with which division Dr. MEAD is associated, stated that Dr. MEAD has been employed by the National Research Council since February, 1942 as an anthropologist at a salary of $6,000.00 per annum and that at that time she was engaged in working first-hand comparative observations of the food situation there. Her book, Coming of Age in Samoa, published last year, further added that Dr. MEAD is a prolific writer, having written many books and articles which are well-liked, loyal, and patriotic. Dr. MEAD spent some time in France working first-hand comparative observations of the food situation there. Her book, Coming of Age in Samoa, published last year, further added that Dr. MEAD is a prolific writer, having written many books and articles which are well-liked, loyal, and patriotic.

Advised that she has known Dr. MEAD since 1930.

Who was acquainted with Dr. MEAD and that she has known her personally since Dr. MEAD was a very brilliant woman, having written many books of which she herself read. She stated that Dr. MEAD is very busy and sometimes is gone two or three weeks at a time in connection with her work. Her reputation and character speak beyond question and she is very glad to have a person of Dr. MEAD's caliber living in the apartment house. She further added that Dr. MEAD does not associate with anyone else in the building except her roommates. She is a very quiet woman who has time for her hobbies and only at the apartment long enough to rest. She recommends Dr. MEAD very highly as a loyal and patriotic American.

Over one half of the professional anthropologists in this country are directly concerned in the war effort, and most of the rest are doing part-time war work. The comprehensive knowledge of the peoples and cultures of the world which anthropologists have gathered through field research has proved of great value to both the Army and the Navy, and to the various war agencies. The Association has cooperated in setting up the Ethnographic Board, the Committees on the Anthropology of Oceania and Africa and the Committee for Latin American Studies.

Later that year the AAA created a 'Committee on Anthropology and the War Effort', with anthropologists Ralph Beals (chairman), Margaret Mead and David Mandelbaum leading the coordination of anthropological warfare at home and abroad (Frantz 1973).

As the majority of American anthropologists joined the war effort, a minority – some vocal, some silent – were troubled by the implications of these applications of anthropological methods and the use of bogus research fronts for warfare. The records of these dissenting views run counter to the common misconception that ‘it was only after World War II that a few anthropologists seemed to become conscious of their real [ethical] responsibilities and this led gradually to a more general change of attitude’ (Condronomas 1979: 189). In fact, before and during the war some American anthropologists were extremely critical of anthropology’s neo-colonialist role in the domination of the underdeveloped world, and questioned the ethical propriety of employing anthropology as a weapon against other cultures. Before the war Melville Herskovits recognized that when anthropologists used knowledge gained from fieldwork against peoples studied, unique ethical issues were raised. He wrote:

Though as any other scientist, [the anthropologist] must repay his debt to his own society, he can not forget what he owes to the primitive peoples who give him the information without which his discipline could not exist. And in this, his situation is unique. The subject matter of the ethologist is the human being; to obtain his data he must make friends of the primitives he studies, and only to the extent that he does gain their confidence will his research be of value. Yet often he belongs to a political entity which has taken away the right of self-direction from the very people he is studying. (Herskovits 1936:217)

While the Second World War found American anthropologists working to oppose these rights ‘of self-direction’ and working against the proclaimed interests of cultures that had hosted them and their research, these issues were rarely framed in this way. Some anthropologists, like Laura Thompson, raised questions regarding the legitimacy of wartime anthropology for the ‘highest bidder’, while John Embree and others questioned the methods and reliability of military anthropology (see Embree 1945, Stocking 1976). But during the war, these objections were mostly ignored.

American anthropology brings the war back home

In 1942 United States military social scientists determined that most American soldiers didn’t even seem to know who they were fighting, much less why – though this seemed to matter little as most American soldiers were willing to fight without specific clarifications. New techniques of quantitative social sciences were devoted to studying the knowledge and attitudes of the American military and public.

When soldiers were surveyed with open-ended questions about the war’s aim, an astonishing 36 percent chose not to answer at all and only a handful ever mentioned fighting fascism or defending democracy. According to the Research Branch studies, the number of men who viewed the war ‘from a consistent and favorable intellectual position’ was somewhere between 10 and 20 percent. ‘Why we are fighting the war’ was typically on the bottom of the list of things that soldiers wanted the Army to teach them. In dismay, [Samuel] Stouffer concluded that ‘the war was without a context… simply a vast detour made from the main course of life… It may be said that except for a very limited number of men, little feeling of personal commitment to the war emerged.’ (Herman 1995:69-70).

W. Lloyd Warner studied the impact of World War II on a Midwestern conservative town, where he discovered that small American communities were frightened by the war, yet were invigorated by the intense social solidarity that
accompanied the prospect of war (Warner 1949).

American anthropologists contributed to domestic propaganda programmes that kept the populace on a steady war footing. The inability of Americans to state why they were at war led to the creation of a variety of propaganda agencies to indoctrinate soldiers and the public about the evils of totalitarian governments. In fact,

Congress was rather touchy about making it widely known that the army was engaged in such explicit propaganda during a war directed against exactly such efforts, and only one of Frank Capra’s (propaganda) films was ever shown to civilians, who also knew nothing of the military’s other experiments in direct indoctrination. (Herman 1995:69-70)

Margaret Mead helped reshape American dietary habits for the wartime national Research Council’s Committee on Food Habits (Mabee 1987). In 1943 Ruth Benedict and Gene Welpoth combated prevailing racist attitudes among US troops by drafting a pamphlet on race originally intended to be distributed by the US Army to officers and enlisted men. However, because the pamphlet clearly stated the scientific case against claims of racial superiority it was seen as too controversial, and the Army and the United Service Organization banned its distribution (see Price forthcoming).

While some American anthropologists aimed their war efforts at the American people, most applied their skills to fighting the war abroad, working for agencies like the Office of Strategic Services, the Office of Naval Intelligence, the Ethnographic Board, the Office of War Information and the War Relocation Authority.

American anthropology fighting the war abroad

Dozens of anthropologists worked for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during the War. These anthropologists undertook a variety of tasks ranging from policy analysis to covert missions in which they used their anthropological credentials as cover for clandestine operations. In the early 1940s OSS agent Carleton Coon ‘smuggled firearms and explosives to French resistance groups’ and ‘collected vital intelligence’ in Morocco (Coon 1980:137-138). Coon brought his anthropological training to this task. When the OSS assigned him the task of compiling a 40-page text on Moroccan propaganda, he simply borrowed from his textbook ‘Principles of anthropology and imperialism’.


University Press.


But anthropological applications during World War II also found anthropologists fighting against their own government’s policies, attitudes and strategies in support of principles of justice and peaceful stability that reached beyond nationalism. One of the most striking instances of this can be seen in the actions of anthropologists at OWI, where their most important work consisted of fighting attitudes of racial reductionism within the US War Department.

When I began studying the work of Ruth Benedict and other anthropologists at the OWI, my own views reflected the strong statements made by John Embree when he observed in 1943 that these culture and personality studies had a drastically different comprehension of Japanese culture from that of military and White House decision-makers. He saw a danger in this knowledge gap. In an effort to educate the military in the complexities of the situation, he moved his entire operation over to the Pentagon so that his staff would be closer to the military decision-makers.

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Taylor said military leaders and President Roosevelt and his advisers were convinced that the Japanese were ‘culturally incapable of surrender’ and that they would have to fight to the very last Japanese citizen. As the war progressed, Taylor and his staff found themselves fighting this mindset more than they were fighting the Japanese.

When I interviewed Taylor he called General Joseph Stilwell a ‘maniac’, and recounted a disturbing story of how he (Taylor) had flown to China to meet with Stilwell and discuss what he and his team of anthropologists at OWI had learned about the Japanese and the uses of psychological warfare. Stilwell would listen to none of this, and discuss what he and his team of anthropologists at OWI had learned about the Japanese and the uses of psychological warfare. Stilwell would listen to none of this, and

A 1943 FBI memo detailing the FBI’s investigation into anthropologist Henry Field’s personal correspondence during WWII.

California Press.


soldiers to take the next five captured Japanese soldiers; right in front of Professor Taylor he was to take his sidearm and make one of the soldiers shoot the other four in their heads. The fifth prisoner was then to be flown behind enemy lines and set loose so that he could tell his countrymen what his enemy had made him do. Stilwell reportedly ended his display of disdain for Taylor by exclaiming, ‘Now that is what I call psychological warfare!’ While Taylor left before any such act could be carried out, he had no doubt Stilwell was capable of such deeds. Taylor gave up on trying to change Stilwell’s limited way of thinking, and focused instead on changing the mentality of others in the War Department and White House. As part of this effort, Taylor asked Ruth Benedict and other OWI anthropologists to study the importance of the Emperor in Japanese society, and the position papers that came from this work eventually allowed Taylor to convince President Roosevelt to leave the Emperor out of any conditions of surrender at the inevitable end of the war— a point that Taylor said he did not have to reargue with Harry Truman once he became President.10

At the end of the war Taylor and many of his staff viewed their efforts as having accomplished mixed results. They had brought about some desired changes in military decision-making, yet they found their advice to be frequently ignored. In the spring of 1945 Taylor sent a memo to President Truman stating that he and his staff were convinced that the Japanese were ready to surrender, and the pressures coming from Russian forces on the Asian front made it obvious to the Japanese that the war could not continue. But even as these arguments were made, American military and political leaders were developing plans to employ not one, but two nuclear weapons against Japanese civilian targets, actions that were seen as politically and militarily unnecessary by anthropologists and other staff members at OWI.

Implications
Wars raise the stakes for anthropologists, exposing the nature of our commitments and principles, and as past wars and colonial campaigns have shown, anthropologists as a group have served both the oppressed and the oppressors. Many aspects of our field’s relationship with power remain unresolved, but even if anthropologists were to somehow agree upon shared goals of serving the oppressed of the
world, the question of how such goals were to be achieved would still be unresolved, and issues of anthropology as an instrument of warfare would remain to be settled. However, unsettled or not, the use of anthropology in World War II and other wars is a fertile field of study, raising many questions with implications for our current predicament.

The use of anthropology and anthropologists in Nazi Germany was neither unusual nor exotic, though Muhlimann’s warning concerning the political uses of anthropology by ‘total states’ tends to be interpreted as applying primarily to such obviously depraved policies as those implemented by the Nazi administration. Yet less totalitarian state-managed anthropological research programmes in other hot and cold wars have impacted indigenous cultures in other devastating ways (see Petersen 1999, Price 1998a). As social scientists are now being recruited to assist in ethnic and racial ‘terrorist profiling’ campaigns, the stakes of ignoring such warnings intensify. It is not enough to resist these developments; we have our own Stilwells to educate, and if they prove uneducable, to circumvent—though there is ample evidence to suggest that efforts in this direction would be most effective if we operate as citizen-scholars outside of governmental agencies.

Some of the decisions to be made by anthropologists in times of war are personal, while others are professional. Decisions to join or not join a war in any capacity are in the end always personal decisions, but decisions concerning the use of anthropology in the waging of war are fundamentally professional decisions. While it is not for me or anyone else to demand that others join or resist a particular military campaign, national and international professional anthropological associations have a duty to monitor and evaluate the uses to which anthropology is put in times of war. This duty springs from the basic responsibility of anthropologists to serve, rather than fight or oppress, those we study. If anthropologists will not take action to limit the wartime applications of their discipline, then we do not deserve the trust of those we study in the field.

Using cultural knowledge to fight other cultures raises serious questions involving conflict of interest, protecting the welfare of research subjects and basic issues of consent (Fluehr-Lobban 1994). While interpretation of past interactions during wartime is problematic, consideration of the ethical implications can help prevent future misapplications of anthropology in times of war. As the American President seems intent on committing his nation to a prolonged war against the ill-defined concept of terrorism—and many of his citizens seem suddenly frightened into support of this quest—anthropologists have new responsibilities to focus on the issues embedded in their discipline’s militarily mobilized past.