

## The Historian

By Geoffrey Wawro '78

I've always been a historian. I remember being curious about the origins of everything as a boy. I remember looking things up — going through encyclopedias and atlases, reading the whole shelf of Landmark biographies in grade school, spending my paper route pay on volumes (there were 156 of them) of *Ballantine's Illustrated History of World War II*. Military history was a particular interest because my generation was marinated in war. Most fathers had been in the service and programming on TV was heavily military: *Rat Patrol*, *Combat*, *Twelve O'Clock High*, *Hogan's Heroes*, *Branded*, you name it. Like the producers of those shows, we kids never paused to consider the horrors of war, only the fanfare.

My first German class was at Loomis in 1974 with Frau Ursula Uhlig, but I'd been learning German for years in war movies and shows, snippets like: “*raus, Mach schnell, Schweinhund.*” We used to play “army” all the time when I was a kid, and — because we always pitted Americans against Krauts — pride of place went to the guy who spoke or approximated the best German. By far the best Kraut in our entourage was a guy whom I lost touch with after grade school and then suddenly met again at Loomis Chaffee (years later): Chuck Daukas. He was as menacing a *Landser* as any 10-year-old could be. His guttural bits of German, growled from under a plastic Wehrmacht helmet, were pitch-perfect. In the diffident way of adolescents, when we eventually reconnected — at Bill Eaton's early football tryouts at Loomis, a half dozen years after our last meeting (on a recon mission across the roof of Hughes Convalescent Home in West Hartford, literally running from maintenance personnel and leaping from roof to roof) — we acted as if we'd never met and had had no shared experiences in youth, even though we'd been brothers-in-arms for six years or more.

When I applied for an English-Speaking Union Scholarship at Loomis and was sent to Cheltenham College in England, I remember well the sincere commiserations that were heaped on me by my fellows. Richard Plepler, who anchored the dayhop colony in the Katharine Brush Library before he rocketed to fame in the entertainment industry — coffee in hand, legs crossed, *New York Times* spread — took one look at the Cheltenham brochure: some old boy in a duffel coat watching a somnolent cricket match, wrestled visibly with his emotions, and then simply said, “Well, to each his own.” Other friends expressed amazement that I would abjure the fleshpots of an American college for even a year to enter an all-boys boarding school with British discipline.

That's where I really became a historian, not so much at the school, where I didn't even read history — I was told that I had missed too much English history ever to catch up — but in my beggarly travels around Europe during the breaks. I visited Germany at Christmas, Italy in the spring, and Spain, Portugal and North Africa in the summer. Each of these places impressed me most of all with my ignorance.

At Brown University I majored in history. Brown had a good department. It was quite old-fashioned, in the best sense. They actually taught political and diplomatic history. They hadn't suffered the current malaise of mulching everything with guilt and carving history into victim

and advocacy groups. They hadn't yet torn down the great men and replaced them with nobodies of interest only to a handful of earnest Ph.D.s determined to "give voice" to the downtrodden. Norman Rich did wonderful, well-attended lecture courses on European foreign relations in which he gave voice to the people who actually mattered and the events that shaped history as we know it: Napoleon, Cavour, Bismarck, the Kaiser, the Moroccan Crises, war and peace. The idea for the first book I ever wrote came to me in a class of Norman's. I saw a grainy photograph in a book he assigned of Austrian troops under attack by Prussian troops, and I asked him after the class if there was a book on that war, and he replied that there really wasn't. A decade later, *The Austro-Prussian War: Austria's War with Prussia and Italy in 1866* (Cambridge University Press, 1996) would be the result of that short colloquy. (Quite by chance, I later saw the letter of recommendation Rich wrote for me for grad school. It was a single paragraph an inch in length; it ran something like this: "Wawro was a student in a large lecture course. I did not know him. He got an A. I think it's good he's interested in history.") Charles Fornara gave brilliant lectures on Ancient Greece, chain-smoking evil-smelling Turkish cigarettes throughout. The classroom would literally be filled with smoke at the end. Everyone thought that was quaint, not dangerous.

The most influential class for me at Brown was taught by Stephen Graubard, who divided his time between editing *Daedalus* and teaching at Brown. He taught a lecture class about 20th century Europe that exalted human agency. In Graubard's hands, for example, General Charles de Gaulle became the French Resistance, Liberation and future. There was nothing else, but this great prickly mass of pride, ego and energy, working against sloth, quislings or false friends. In Graubard, we read Keynes and matched economics to history. We read some Fussell in that class — *Abroad*, easily his best book — which gave me a taste for the travel writing (Robert Byron, Evelyn Waugh, Peter Fleming) that would set me free in the years ahead (and shame me out of a sedentary banking career in under two years.)

During Graubard's lecture on De Gaulle, there was a disturbance in the auditorium. I looked around and saw some students mocking Graubard's insistence that a great man had turned the tide of history. Graubard's scoffing critics were horrified. I'd sat near them in the past and heard them muttering; they wanted more discussion of victims: forced laborers, political prisoners, African troops, women perplexed by rationing, and so forth. And yet here's the thing about victims: They're victims, and wallowing piously in their misery doesn't instruct; it merely distracts and dissipates a very limited fund of time unless the context of their misery is elaborated. Yet these post-modernists, as they style themselves, deny context, for context is politics, diplomacy and war, the very "construct" and "structure" they abhor, neglect and even deny. (Where I work today, a junior history professor recently told a class that the Battle of Waterloo might never have happened. We only have records of it that might have been fabricated, he argued with a straight face.) In that small way, back at Brown in the '80s, I was present at the creation of the p.c. movement, which has moved far and fast in my lifetime, gutting the meaningful study of history in schools and colleges. Students today lack a sense of the vigor and purpose of history. To far too many, history is just a little shop of horrors — a class where you describe abuses, or give credit to neglected groups, and receive an A for doing so. Brown had an exchange program with the Wilhelm Pieck University in East Germany. It was, of course, a one-way exchange. We could go to them, but they couldn't come to us. This was 1981, the high-water mark of Communism, the Cold War and the Iron Curtain. I received a student visa and the right to enter the GDR and travel freely there for six or seven weeks. The view I had of

the Cold War was unique: I lived cheek by jowl with East German students, read their crummy newspapers, ate their crummy food, and roved around the country, always finding a clean hostel run by nuns to sleep in. The university social club had a single record which we heard non-stop for a month: Don McLean's *American Pie*. I imagine the regular student body heard it non-stop for four years.

History as a career came to me in East Germany, for the simple reason that I felt it so closely. In Western Europe, so much of history has been obliterated by modern development and prices. Who can afford to visit even a single French or Italian museum these days, especially on a student budget? There in Eastern Europe, history beckoned everywhere you went. Dresden was still strewn with beautiful, blackened Baroque rubble from February 1945. Swathes of the old Saxon capital had been crudely restored, but you could still walk into blasted palaces and cathedrals as if the bombers had just departed. Where repairs had been completed, you could tour every palace, crypt, gallery, bell-tower or museum for pennies: culture being one of the only entertainments in the drab Communist East. I visited August the Strong's palace at Moritzburg and was the only one there, walking the French gardens, striding down the echoing halls. At Schloss Pillnitz, I stared into the waters of the Elbe and thought of all the kings, emperors and armies that had struggled for this crossroads. History, and above all that Central European region — the cockpit of Europe since the Renaissance — became my passion.

In the practical way of the day and my family, I went into banking. I hoped that there would be something romantic about banking; I thought of the Rothschilds, the Fuggers, the Medici, and how they'd greased the skids of history. It was not to be. After a year-long training program, I entered into the job of "credit analyst," which was nothing like being a Medici: no tense negotiations, no whispered meetings with heads of state, nothing but spread-sheets, dull pencils and calculators. Before long, I found myself taking long lunches and going over to the New York Public Library to research the book on the Austro-Prussian War I'd been mulling since college. Soon I was bringing books back to the bank, concealing them between spreadsheets, and reading them at work.

Before long, I was in graduate school studying for a Ph.D. in history. I'm always sympathetic to even my dullest grad students nowadays because I was so dull myself. That's not false modesty. The things that drew me to history — drama, personalities, ideas, battles — are not exactly what get you promoted at grad school. Above all, grad school teaches you to read, not for details, but for interpretation. Grad school teaches you to see the forest, not the trees. As someone who had come to history because he loved the trees, I was badly equipped to switch to forests.

Eventually I did. To get your Ph.D., you have to pass oral exams. At Yale, that was a two-hour meeting with three professors in which they would examine you on over 100 books and articles in your major fields. That's a do-or-die incentive to read for interpretation — what the historian is arguing relative to what other historians have argued on the same question — as opposed to mere dates, names or other facts. This was a challenge for someone who had begun the study of history at Loomis from some excellent teachers, including Allen Beebe, who famously sat at a student desk with a recipe box in front of him, from which he would randomly pull index cards with names and dates, look around the room and ask: "Err, Wawro, who was Largo Caballero?"

Or, “Err, Rogan, when was the Battle of Guadalajara?” In the end, I reduced my notes on every book to a single post-it note. I passed.

The next step in becoming a historian was the dissertation. The grad student who had only recently learned to read, was now expected to research and write something wholly new and original and worthy of publication by a journal or a university press.

I went to Vienna on a Fulbright Scholarship in 1989. I was privileged to be there for two years and to watch the Wall come tumbling down, and to be among those traveling freely into Eastern Europe for the first time since Hitler rolled into Prague and Warsaw. I actually knocked my piece of the Berlin Wall off of the Berlin Wall.

But my real discoveries were historical. The Austrian military archive was housed then in a stately old barracks near the Hofburg called the Stiftskaserne. I researched there for two years, as well as in the diplomatic archive across the way in the Ballhausplatz. Historians who publish set themselves the task of recreating history from documents, of breathing life into dead, dusty paper. This isn’t easy. In the first place, documents are fragments. In the second place, they usually represent mere points of view. How do you conjure something like the “truth” from fragmentary points of view?

In the end, you find your way, using discretion, judgment and hard work. One of my old Yale professors once said that the greatest quality in a historian is *Sitzfleisch* — literally the meat on your ass that enables you to sit patiently in archives for weeks or months on end digging for the evidence that will make your book. That same professor also said something else that I’ve never forgotten: “Just because someone writes a book about something doesn’t make it important.” I didn’t agree with him at the time — he was condemning one of my favorite books — but I’ve had reason (in my mind, at least) to use that phrase a million times since.

Getting back to *Sitzfleisch*: Generally, the historian has a rough narrative sense of what happened and in what order. What the professional historian adds is the complexity: *Why* did it happen, and why in *that* order? The historian can add motive and influences, thus entirely reshaping a question or debate. One example here must suffice. My dissertation, which became my first book, was about the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 in which Germany was unified. The narrative had been set and undisputed for over a century: A gallant Austrian general named Benedek had led a brave Austrian army into a war with the Prussians and had been defeated by court intrigues in Vienna, insubordinate generals in his own army, and the superior tactics of the Prussians. This view, which preserved the reputation of the Austrian army while still allowing for Prussian victory, was so established that it had been picked up and verified as true by no less an authority than the great Princeton and Stanford historian Gordon Craig, who had written the only English-language history of the war in 1964.

As I worked through the archives in Vienna, I found documents that had apparently never seen the light of day. They’d been shoved into cartons after 1866 and never examined. Craig had never been to the archives at all for his book on 1866, relying on published sources instead. One of the more striking discoveries I made was the pocket diary of a general staff major named Karl Stransky. It was a little volume the size of an address book. The captain had scribbled in it

throughout the campaign. Clearly no one had ever read it (the script was smudged, crabbed and small, nearly illegible) or perhaps it had been neglected because its contents were so explosive. Stransky described life in Benedek's headquarters in real-time: The great general was paralyzed by fear; he'd been promoted beyond his abilities; comfortable leading a division, he had no idea how to lead an army; he hid in his bedroom all day and night; he made no plans; he was depressed; he talked to no one; he refused to read or approve any plans. He was paranoid. The decisive battle of the war swept over him and his army like an unexpected tsunami, even though the Prussian corps had been gathering around Benedek for days.

My method was forged in that kind of research. I realized then, as Napoleon had put it, that "in war, the man matters more than the men." Historians tend to focus too little on this; they tend to look at forces, not individuals, and yet as often as not defeat comes from inferior leadership, not inferior forces. This method is all the more pleasing because it explains so much in the civilian world too: why some schools, colleges, teams or businesses fail and others excel. Look at the New York Yankees with their mammoth payroll and terrible record. They have a leadership problem.

I worked for seven years at the Naval War College before returning to a university job. There after 9/11 we were steered heavily into security studies — away from history — and security studies is a field that reminds me of sports radio: the guys who opine from Monday to Saturday about next Sunday's game. Nobody really knows who's going to win, just as nobody really knows if Kim Jong-un will ever fire a nuclear missile in anger or how the Syrian Civil War will turn out. So everybody talks and publishes speculatively and ephemerally. You can hurl your entire collection of security studies monographs in the trash without fear because, once past their sale date, they're stale and worthless. Time has advanced; the speculative future has become the known present and past. The monographs were right or wrong in their predictions. History, in contrast, is real and lasting: Sit on your *Sitzfleisch* in an archive, discover the actual workings of the past and, to paraphrase Walt Whitman, you've contributed your verse to the powerful play of man.

This is among the great rewards and privileges of an academic career: the opportunity to recover the past and present it to contemporaries and future generations in revealing ways that will never die; on the contrary, the best history becomes history, as it grafts onto older interpretations. As a military historian I always feel a duty to my subjects too, one I was reminded of at the great mausoleum at Verdun, where I read this on the wall: "War is our youth, my friend, lying forgotten here in the ground." Wandering around old battlefields, I feel the ghosts of these men: ordinary men, like you or me, drafted at a young age, raked into the war machine and killed for a cause most never knew or understood. Recovering something of their memory seems to me as important as winking the truth out of history. They are victims ennobled by their context.

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