

Daily Telegraph, Monday 9 November 2009

Brigadier Anthony Cowgill

Brigadier Anthony Cowgill MBE, who died on October 29 aged 93, had a varied career as a soldier; as chief industrial engineer for Rolls-Royce; and providing high-level liaison between many of Britain's leading companies and government policy-makers. But his two most notable contributions – illuminating one of the most controversial episodes of the Second World War and explaining the “gobbledegook” of EU treaties – were made at an age when most people have retired.



The Cowgill Inquiry into the repatriation of Cossacks and Yugoslavs at the end of the Second World War by the allies. L-R Lord Brimelow, Brigadier Anthony Cowgill and Christopher Booker Photo: Philip Hollis © Daily Telegraph

The first of these achievements centred on the British Army's handover, in Austria in 1945, of 47,000 Cossacks to the Soviet Union. This later led to widely publicised allegations that Harold Macmillan, in 1945 Britain's political representative in the Mediterranean, and Lord Aldington, a senior officer in Austria at the time, had conspired to defy orders and higher command by handing over the Cossacks to almost certain death. Exhaustive researches by a small team headed by Cowgill showed that the charges were baseless and had arisen from a fundamental misreading of the historical evidence.

The second initiative to win him plaudits was to present the ever more complex series of European treaties in a form which made them uniquely comprehensible. His annotated editions of each treaty, from Maastricht to Lisbon, continue to prove invaluable to politicians and many others.

Anthony Cowgill was born on November 7 1915, the son of a Yorkshire mill manager. Educated at Bradford and Manchester Grammar Schools, he went on to graduate in Mining Engineering at Birmingham University. Shortly before the start of the Second World War he signed up for the regular Army, joining the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers after Sandhurst. He spent a year in Canada helping to develop the waterproofing of tanks, a secret weapon key to the success of the Normandy invasion in 1944. Landing in France shortly after D Day, he served on Montgomery's 2nd Army headquarters' staff until the end of the war, and was present at Luneberg Heath in May 1945 when Montgomery took the surrender of the German forces in northern Europe. Shortly afterwards Cowgill was awarded a military MBE.

He was then, as India prepared for Independence in 1947, seconded to the Partition Commission, organising the separation of the country's armed forces between India and Pakistan, after which he was assigned to the new Pakistani army. This led to what he described as the most worrying moment of his life. Returning to his Lahore headquarters one day he found himself, in British Army uniform, the only white man on a train overrun by thousands of armed Pathan tribesmen bent on seizing Kashmir. Sure his last hour had come, he was highly relieved when, addressing him as "sahib", they treated him instead with friendly respect.

After serving in the Korean War, Cowgill eventually retired from the Army as a brigadier in 1969 to become Chief Industrial Engineer to Rolls-Royce. He was closely involved in the final stages of the development of the revolutionary RB-211 jet engine, the costs of which led to the firm's bankruptcy and its nationalisation by the Heath Government in 1971, although the RB-211 was ultimately a huge commercial success. In 1979 Cowgill set up the highly-respected British Management Data Foundation (BMDF), run from his home in the Cotswolds, to provide expert briefing to many of the leading companies in British industry and to assist them in high-level liaison with government on matters of common concern.

In 1986, then aged 71, he was shocked to read *The Minister and the Massacres*, a book by Count Nikolai Tolstoy accusing Harold Macmillan of having conspired with senior Army officers in 1945 to commit a "war crime" by handing over large numbers of surrendered Cossack and Yugoslavs to face death at the hands of their Communist enemies, in flagrant breach of military orders. Since this was the gravest charge ever levelled at a British prime minister or at the British Army, he invited Lord Brimelow, a former permanent head of the Foreign Office, and the journalist Christopher Booker, both of whom had studied this unhappy episode, to join him in a full investigation of the facts.

Initially all three had found Tolstoy's account persuasive, but were aware that there were significant gaps in the evidence. By a remarkable feat of detective work over four years, Cowgill managed to track down all the missing signals and orders necessary to a proper understanding of what had happened. In particular, thanks to inspired guesswork, he discovered in a Washington archive 127 unopened boxes containing many key documents previously thought lost. What gradually emerged was a picture of the events totally at odds with the version given by Tolstoy.

In 1989 many of these documents played a part in the libel action brought by Lord Aldington against Tolstoy, resulting in the largest libel damages ever awarded in a British court (£1.6 million, although this was never paid). When, in 1990, the Cowgill team published, it revealed that the part played by Macmillan had been quite irrelevant to the fate of the Cossacks. The handovers had been fully authorised from General Alexander down, in full accord with established Allied policy. Indeed, several of the “massacres” described by Tolstoy had never in fact taken place and the majority of Cossacks were released from gulags after a year. Cowgill’s report, *The Repatriations from Austria in 1945*, was praised by leading historians as a model of its kind.

In 1992 Cowgill was again shocked to learn that Parliament was being asked to approve the Maastricht treaty before MPs had been given the chance properly to read it. All they were given was a series of amendments to the existing treaties, which read out of context were no more than gobbledegook (a Foreign Office minister said it would be “improper” to publish a complete version of the treaty before it was ratified). With the aid of his son Andrew Cowgill, worked round the clock to produce a “consolidated” version, putting all the amendments in context. Sir Keith Joseph, a former Tory Cabinet minister, then arranged for copies to be circulated to every MP before the Maastricht Bill came up for second reading.

The BMDF’s edition of the treaty proved so uniquely valuable that it was given semi-official status, much in demand by policy-makers and many others, not only in Britain, but also in Europe and America (one admirer was Henry Kissinger). Cowgill and his son went on to produce similarly authoritative editions of all the subsequent EU treaties, right up to their latest, *The Lisbon Treaty in Perspective*.

Tony Cowgill was a shrewd observer of the world, believing that public policy must be “data driven”, and rest on properly researched evidence. It was this which led him to increasing scepticism on many issues, from the value of our membership of the EU to global warming. In 1948 he married Anne, whom he had met in India where she was serving as a WRNS officer. She died in 2005, and he is survived by their son and daughter.