

# Project Camelot – A U.S. Army Social Science Research Project

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*Project Camelot was an ambitious social science project that came into existence in late 1964. The goal of the project was to assess the causes of war and to identify the actions that the American government could take to prevent such wars. The period between the introduction of Project Camelot and its ultimate demise raises interesting questions about the relationship between the American government, the military, and social sciences.*

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To better understand the operation and purpose of Project Camelot, we need to examine the organisation of the Special Operations Research Office (SORO), which was responsible for Project Camelot and also implemented it. The Office of Special Operations Research was established in 1956 to provide reports to the United States Armed Forces on a variety of topics. During its eight years of operation, SORO produced approximately 50 book-length studies on several European, Asian, Middle Eastern, African and Latin American countries, the basic philosophy of which was operational research and systems analysis, or ORSA (operations research and systems analysis).<sup>2</sup>

## Operations research and systems analysis – ORSA

ORSA is a philosophy of science that emerged during World War II. Operative research, unlike most sciences, can point to a well-defined combination of circumstances and events. After Hitler came to power in Germany, England sought adequate defence against possible air attacks, which resulted in the development of the key elements of an effective defence by the end of 1937: the radar and the Hawker Hurricane and Supermarine Spitfire fighter. However, these devices could not be integrated into an effective system, and were left to improvisation as the disappointing results of an aerial exercise in July 1938 showed. This new type of research, carried out in close collaboration with officers of the British Royal Air Force, appeared directly in the essential developments of England's anti-aircraft system, which was put to a successful test during the Battle of Britain between August and September 1940.

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<sup>2</sup> PRICE 2016: 211.

The success of the partnership between scientists and operational forces encouraged the spread of operational research to other United Kingdom commands and organisations. When the United States entered the war, this British example was followed by American military leaders, and by the end of 1942, it was being used by groups of American scientists in the United States Navy and Army Air Forces. However, the name was Americanised and called operations research. By the end of the war, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States already employed 700 scientists in the operational research domain.<sup>3</sup>

As the U.S. Army examined its ORSA requirements, the Army-wide analytical organisation applied both traditional operations research methods and new systems methods and cost-effectiveness analysis to problems in weapon systems development, and tactical and strategic doctrine development. In fact, the number and staffing of U.S. Army organisations – contracted and in-house – using ORSA methods to solve current U.S. Army problems and plans for the future grew significantly during the McNamara years. By the end of the war, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States employed 700 scientists in the work loosely described in these terms. Part of the work of the scientists participating in the program was utilised only in the technical background. An important innovation was that they examined and evaluated the results of tactical operations, developed combat innovations, predicted their consequences, and actually applied the innovations by comparing the expected results with the results actually achieved. This knowledge often served as a basis for tactical planning and even provided important knowledge for strategic decisions in the later stages of the war.<sup>4</sup>

Before the release of SORO, it is important to note that the 1960s and early 1970s were turbulent times in world history. Resurgent political movements and profound economic and social changes have affected many regions of the world, including the United States. The rapid development of technology and changing international politics, especially the communist insurgency in Vietnam, forced major changes in the weaponry, organisation, and doctrine of the United States Armed Forces. Such fundamental and rapid changes could not be coped without operational research and systems analysis (ORSA) techniques, which greatly contributed to the effective decision-making in the army during the mentioned period.

## The Office of Special Operations Research

The Office of Special Operations Research was established at the American University in Washington, D.C., to support the Army's research in *insurgency/counterinsurgency operations, unconventional warfare, and psychological operations*. SORO's research included political, economic, social and cultural studies of the given area, as well as the causes and nature of conflicts and uprisings in a given country, and the tactics for overcoming them. Their investigations emphasised the psychological vulnerability of

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<sup>3</sup> MISER 1980: 140–141.

<sup>4</sup> MISER 1980: 140–141.

the foreign population and the possibilities of exploiting it, as well as the feasibility of a possible military assistance for the countries concerned.<sup>5</sup>

From March 1962, SORO's staff expanded with the usual supervisory, administrative and support elements, as well as with two technical divisions (Research Division and Foreign Area Studies Division), whose tasks were regulated by a separate contract. The Research Department was established with a director, two department heads and six interdisciplinary research groups. The topics were wide-ranging, with a department responsible for conducting research on psychological operations and guerrilla/insurgency warfare, among others. The activities of the Research Department were supervised by the head of research and development of the U.S. Army. The Department of Foreign Studies was organised with a head of department, two assistants and four interdisciplinary research groups, several historians and geographers, as well as an editor. The department was responsible for preparing national and regional studies, and the prepared materials touched on political, economic, sociological, and military topics. The activities of the Department of Foreign Studies were supervised by the head of psychological warfare (later the head of special operations).<sup>6</sup>

SORO's mission was reorganised and it was renamed as American University Center for Research in Social Systems (CRESS) in July 1966, which consisted of two component departments called the Social Science Research Institute (SSRI) and the Counterinsurgency Information Analysis Center (CINFAC). The aim of the Social Science Research Institute was to involve 'special' professional talents in specific social science research, development, and preparation of studies. SSRI conducted social science research to support United States Army military operations in unconventional warfare, psychological operations, military assistance programs, counterbalances, and foreign cultures.<sup>7</sup>

CINFAC was tasked with creating a system to support the operations of the United States Army and other Department of Defense (DOD) organisations by collecting, storing, retrieving, and analysing information about the peoples and cultures of the world. Controversy arose in 1965 over one of SORO's research, which came into focus in connection with a study on Chile, a larger SORO research project part of the Camelot project, which examined the causes of revolutions and uprisings in underdeveloped nations and "political instability methods of treatment". The dispute over the Camelot project resulted in the renaming of the SORO organisation, and the CRESS was born in 1966. It continued to operate until 1969 based on military contracts with the American University. The CRESS's contract was terminated after civil protests against the research organisations' role in Vietnam that showed how they tried to influence the Vietnamese government's national affairs. The CRESS was later taken over by the American Institutes for Research, an independent, non-profit research organisation established in 1946

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<sup>5</sup> SHRADER 2008: 199.

<sup>6</sup> SHRADER 2008: 200.

<sup>7</sup> SHRADER 2008: 201.

and currently employing 1,100 employees worldwide. The organisation has offices in Pittsburgh, Washington DC, Palo Alto and Bangkok.<sup>8</sup>

## The Camelot Project

Project Camelot's roots date back to World War II, where psychologists already had a significant and growing influence among high-level policymakers with generous financial support and a wealth of theoretical, methodological, and organisational experience. In World War II, military psychologists examined the mental skills of the enemy and planned several psychological operations. In the years after 1945, psychology moved rapidly along the path outlined by the experiences of World War II. During the Korean War and the Cold War,<sup>9</sup> psychology maintained its momentum and established its future in the military. During this period, experts in psychology promoted the scientific objectives of national security and developed unique analyses of the development and revolution of emerging Third World states. In these areas, the experts ensured the maximisation of the practical, especially military, usefulness of theoretical and research activities. Because of their experience in World War II and its aftermath, behaviourists were readily employed by individual military agencies. Project Camelot and its aftermath show how far experienced psychological experts have come since the outbreak of World War II.<sup>10</sup>

Plans for Camelot began in 1964 based on a report from the Defense Science Board (DSB), a powerful military science advisory group. The DSB report revealed several gaps in the Department of Defense's (DoD) behavioural science programs, particularly in the study of the world's many small conflicts and their revolutionary movements. Later, the military launched a major project called "Methods to Predict and Influence Social Change and the Potential for Internal War", which became infamous as Project Camelot.<sup>11</sup>

The report of the Defense Science Board was also facilitated by the report formulated by the planners of the Army Office of Research and Development, which was established in 1963. In this report, they expressed concern about the Soviet-sponsored "wars of national liberation". These wars were supported by the Soviets in countries such as Cuba, Yemen, and the Belgian Congo. Since 1945, experts have been communicating the fact that behavioural science is very important in defeating the Soviets, perhaps its most important contribution to stopping communism. Their goal was no less than to anticipate and control the social and psychological challenges of World War III. According to the inventors of the project: "the CAMELOT project is a study aimed at determining the feasibility of a general social system model that would enable the prediction and influence of politically significant aspects of social development in the developing countries of the world."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> SHRADER 2008: 202.

<sup>9</sup> KALÓ 2019.

<sup>10</sup> See: <https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft696nb3n8&chunk.id=d0e3318&toc.depth=1&toc.id=d0e3318&brand=ucpress>

<sup>11</sup> SOLOVEY 2012.

<sup>12</sup> HOROWITZ 1967: 47.

The goals of the Camelot project were formulated by the Subcommittee on International Organizations and Movements of the United States Committee on Foreign Affairs as follows:

“The Research Office (SORO) at American University,<sup>13</sup> the Army began to prepare a project, which sought to integrate many disparate research problems in pursuit of a single operational objective by attempting to develop a generalized model of a developing society. The purpose of this project was to produce a better understanding of how the processes of social change operate in the developing countries. On the one hand, Project Camelot was intended to assist in identifying the forerunners of social breakdown and the resultant opportunity for Communist penetration and possible takeover;”<sup>14</sup>

The Camelot project was, therefore, intended to test a general systems approach to predicting and influencing instability in several Latin American countries. However, Camelot never made it past the planning stage, as in May 1965 – less than a year after the Chilean press was outraged by the leaked plans – it triggered a backlash within the United States government that led to the project’s cancellation. The project fell through when an offer targeting the details of a Chilean professor’s collaboration, was leaked. Due to the unexpected public outcry, congressmen feared that such “tricky research” could endanger important foreign alliances.<sup>15</sup>

The great revolutions led by Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and Ho Chi Minh proved that the use of social scientists working in Camelot project is essential to understand the sources of revolutionary movements and uprisings in Latin America and to develop different strategies to analyse them. SORO referred to these researches as “insurgency prevention” research. Initially, six countries were chosen for the study, the first being Chile.<sup>16</sup>

In April 1965, Chilean-born University of Pittsburgh anthropologist Hugo Nutini travelled to Chile to recruit scientists for a behavioural science research project on the revolutionary process and counterinsurgency measures called Project Camelot. When the Chilean scientists discovered that the U.S. military was actually funding the research, they questioned Nutini, who denied the fact. The situation became so embittered between the Chilean social scientists, the Chilean government and Nutini that both the academy and even the Chilean government banned him from returning to his country. In the meantime, criticism of the Camelot project went far beyond Chile’s borders. During the Cold War, countries with hostile relations with the United States, from Cuba to the Soviet Union, condemned this project. The negative international response also caused problems for the American government. U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara withdrew the project on July 8, 1965 to reduce the political damage caused by the program, but

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<sup>13</sup> American University was founded by John Fletcher Hurst, a Methodist bishop who dreamt of creating a university that would train future civil servants. Established and supported by Congress in 1893, the university is a student-centred research institution located in Washington, DC. See: <https://www.american.edu/about/history.cfm>

<sup>14</sup> EGGERS 2014.

<sup>15</sup> REIVICH 2007.

<sup>16</sup> GUSTERSON 2009.

the military continued to fund these studies under the umbrella of classified research. Public political backlash from the project, however, sparked further debate among social scientists, politicians and journalists.<sup>17</sup>

When the true nature of the Camelot project was revealed, it was forced to limit its public activities, so the Armed Forces of the United States secretly continued to finance the confidential research, which they expected to learn about the backgrounds of past conflicts in the country under investigation to get an explanation of the generalities of revolutionary processes to set up a model to predict conflicts. They wanted to create an analytical method that would most likely predict the extent and development of internal conflicts in a given region or country. It was hoped that such knowledge would help military leaders to anticipate social change and enable them to plan effective intervention in terms of U.S. Cold War political goals and military needs. According to economic historian Walt W. Rostow, who was national security adviser to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, it would have provided the United States with powerful generalisations about so-called traditional societies. Before the closure of the Camelot project, he assured his supporters with the positive goal of achieving significant scientific progress that could advance American foreign policy goals, satisfy the military's changing knowledge needs, while at the same time helping to prevent the advance of the Communists. Because of its ambitious goals, Camelot was a great opportunity among several psychologists who believed that they could contribute to the development of democracy and freedom by working with the government and the military.<sup>18</sup>

The biggest concern of foreign countries was that the Camelot project revealed the intention of the U.S. foreign policy to intervene in the internal conflicts of any country in the world according to its interests. They referred to the project as a hidden form of espionage, in which they violated the sovereignty of the countries under investigation through scientific research.<sup>19</sup>

## **Minerva is the Camelot project of the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

The attack of al-Qaeda on September 11, 2001 greatly changed the research and analysis structure of the American national security organisations and they tried to build a more accurate forecasting system, for which the increase in the number of social scientists and the establishment of closer cooperation became indispensable. The Pentagon's growing interest in anthropology has sparked a major debate between the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and the Armed Forces of the United States about exactly what tasks social scientists can perform on the side of the military. The Human Terrain System,<sup>20</sup> funded by the Ministry of Defense, which employed socio-cultural experts directly in the

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<sup>17</sup> SOLOVEY 2012.

<sup>18</sup> EGGERS 2014.

<sup>19</sup> MONTES 1965.

<sup>20</sup> SZTANKAI 2013.

field of operations between 2007 and 2014 to better understand foreign society, proved to be the most controversial program.

In Roman mythology, Minerva was the goddess of wisdom and war after which the program was named. Initially, Minerva received little media attention, but due to the ambitious Pentagon initiative, it increasingly became the centre of attention, especially after comparative articles appeared regarding the Camelot project and Minerva's mission. Robert Gates, former Secretary of Defense of the United States, announced the Minerva initiative on 14 April 2008 at a conference held at American University. As he said:

“[W]e envision consortia of universities that will promote research in specific areas. These consortia could also be repositories of open-source documentary archives. The Department of Defense, perhaps in conjunction with other government agencies, could provide the funding for these projects. Let me be clear that the key principle of all components of the Minerva Consortia will be complete openness and rigid adherence to academic freedom and integrity. There will be no room for ‘sensitive but unclassified’, or other such restrictions in this project.”<sup>21</sup>

In the program argument formulated by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, the DoD sponsors research topics that deal with terrorism, religious radicalism, and understanding China's international role and military needs, among others.<sup>22</sup>

The Ministry of Defense and the National Science Foundation (NDF) finally launched the Minerva Initiative program in 2008, which at the beginning received \$50 million in funding. According to the project's website, Minerva's goal is: “to use and group the resources of the nation's most important universities”; “It seeks to define and develop basic knowledge about the background of current and future conflicts, with a view to better understanding the world's most important regions and political processes.” The call for applications mentions anthropology, economics, political science, sociology, social and cognitive psychology and computer science as relevant disciplines. Projects receiving funding include: “A New Analysis for Measuring and Countering the Social Influence and Persuasion of Extremist Groups” from the Arizona State University; “Mobilizing the Media: A Deep and Comparative Analysis of Magazines, Music, and Video in the Age of Terrorism” from Georgia; “Tracking Environmental Spread in Social Contagion” by the State University; by Cornell University research, “Motivations and Cognitive-Social Elements of Radicalization/De-Radicalization”, by the University of Maryland. At least some of the Minerva projects are clearly related to the problem of predicting revolutions or radicalisation. Inevitably, there are also neuroscience projects funded by Minerva. For example, researchers at the University of Chicago received a \$3.4 million grant for the “Social and Neurological Research on Martyrdom” project, which examines how ISIS propaganda videos resonate with viewers. They aim to reveal exactly what happens in the brain when an individual is encouraged to change their mind.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See: <https://archive.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1228>

<sup>22</sup> TIRMAN 2008.

<sup>23</sup> KRISHNAN 2017: 86.

## Summary

Many articles deal with the question of how ethical it is to involve different disciplines in military tasks. Perhaps the question is not the examination of ethics, but the depth of use.

“Armed struggle, war is one of the defining characteristics of our human existence. A form of social existence which, in the event of its formation or occurrence – due to its complexity, as well as its extension to all other areas of social existence – in a given historical period is of the first rank from the point of view of the affected or interested social groups, rejecting all other social activities, or rather, it becomes a social activity subordinating them.”<sup>24</sup>

As such, avoiding war is vital in which the role of the national security services is outstanding. There is no choice between the chosen tools that can be used to save lives. In times of war, battle tactics and technological innovations are the result of adapting to the unique tactics of the enemy, in which the use of social sciences is unavoidable.

The war in this special century will not be tipped to the winner by the number of weapons, technical superiority and better trained soldiers, but by the backbone of military science, i.e. the integration and application of social sciences such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science, communication – and the ability of media science, mass media, economics and, of course, international law. The use of these sciences in military operations, from planning to execution, have become the basis of modern warfare.<sup>25</sup>

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