

In Memoriam

Ellis Joffe (1934–2010)*

Harlan Jencks

The Biography

We have lost a giant. Professor Ellis Joffe was one of the world's leading China scholars, and the preeminent pioneer in the field of Chinese military politics.

Ellis Joffe was born in Shanghai on 9 June 1934. His parents had come to China as children when their parents fled Russia during the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. They had a good life in China and enjoyed the active Jewish community life. As for other Jews, however, they found life during the Japanese occupation and the immediate post war years was tough and full of deprivations. With the communist victory in 1949, they left China and migrated to Israel. Ellis was 14 years old and didn't know any Hebrew at all. He attended school in the mornings and studied with a Hebrew tutor in the afternoons. Though he studied hard and learned quickly, he always said that he spoke Hebrew like an "*ole hadash*" (new immigrant). It wasn't true, of course, but the statement was typical of Elli's¹ self-deprecating humour.²

When he was 18 his parents returned to the Far East with his younger sister, but Ellis remained in Israel. He served in the army (infantry) and studied political science (international relations) at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Also during that time he married and started a family with Michal, the love of his life. After completing his BA in 1959 they lived for two years in Hong Kong, where he not only earned an MA from Hong Kong University (1961), but also was a reporter and assistant editor at the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. In Hong Kong, Mark Mancall "spotted" him, encouraged him to study at Harvard, and arranged with John Fairbank for a scholarship, so the young family moved to Boston. Five years later, with his Harvard PhD, Michal, and two daughters, Joffe returned to Israel where he took up a teaching position at the Hebrew University in the Department of International Relations and (after its establishment in 1968) the Department of East Asian Studies. He was promoted to senior lecturer in 1969, associate professor in 1973, and full

* I am grateful to all those who generously provided information and recollections. First and foremost, I am grateful to Michal Joffe and Yitzhak Shichor. I also wish to thank, *inter alia*, Tamar Arazi, Richard Baum, Jean-Pierre Cabestan, Tom Christensen, Paul Cohen, Robert Elegant, John Frankenstein, Paul Godwin, Merle Goldman, Roy Kamphausen, William Kirby, Mark Mancall, Harvey Nelsen, KP Ng, Jonathan Pollack, Susan Puska, David Shambaugh, Michael Swaine, Michael Yahuda and David Zweig.

1 In correspondence, I have noted at least four renderings of "Elli," "Elic," "Ellie," "Eli." Except in direct quotations, I use Michal Joffe's spelling ("Elli") throughout.

2 Email message from Michal Joffe via Tamar Arazi, 19 March 2010, and from Michael Yahuda 16 April, 2010.

professor in 1981. He was also visiting professor at Tel-Aviv University from 1979 on. He retired at the age of 68 in 2002. He was a research fellow at Harvard University (1966–67) and spent sabbaticals at Harvard, Michigan, Saint Antony's College Oxford, and the Australian National University.^{3,4}

Ellis Joffe passed away on 27 January 2010 at his home in Jerusalem. For six months he had been suffering from colon cancer, complicated by the effects of a recent stroke. He is survived by his widow Michal, their daughters Galit and Tamar, and six grandchildren. In the company of other scholars, Elli seldom spoke of his own private life. But an occasional comment made it clear that Michal and his family were very dear to him, and the rock of his existence. Michal writes that, “Elli loved his children unconditionally and was very proud of each one of them.”⁵

The Scholar

In his first major publication, *Party and Army* (1965), Joffe wrote of the demands of “emerging professionalization versus political control” in the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA).⁶ This issue remained the focus of his research and publication. The People's Republic of China, he wrote, needed to create “...a corps of officers trained in modern military specialties, and to adopt measures that would induce them to make military life their vocation. It was necessary, in short, to create a professional officer corps.” At the same time, the Communist Party had to maintain complete control over the PLA and its officers. Michael Yahuda writes, “Unlike many China scholars of his generation, the basis of Eli's analysis of Chinese politics and the role of the military remained intellectually consistent through all the upheavals from the Maoist era to the present day.”⁷

He was not only consistent, he was right. Based upon his analysis of Chinese civil-military relations in the 1950s and early 1960s, Joffe foresaw the “red versus expert” contradiction that was one of the ideological fundamentals underlying the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The military imperatives Joffe had identified operated throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s despite the existence of an interlocking hierarchy of revolutionary leaders who held multiple party, military and governmental positions. Even at the height of the Cultural Revolution, when many observers believed Maoist ideology had overcome the imperatives of military professionalism, Joffe held to his analysis.

3 Email message from Michal Joffe via Tamar Arazi, 19 March 2010.

4 Email message from Yitzhak Shichor, 5 February 2010.

5 Email message from Michal Joffe via Tamar Arazi, 19 March 2010.

6 Ellis Joffe, *Party and Army: Professionalism and Political Control in the Chinese Officer Corps, 1949–1964* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

7 Email message from Michael Yahuda, 16 April 2010.

After Mao's death, modernizing military professionals backed by Deng Xiaoping gradually and painfully repaired the military and political mess that was the PLA in 1979. By 1990 or so, death and retirement had almost entirely separated the PLA officer corps from the civilian party and governmental bureaucracies. At the apex of the party hierarchy, the officer corps has been represented by a diminishing number of senior officers. Today, there are only two uniformed officers among the 16 members of the Communist Party's Politburo, and none at all on its nine-member Standing Committee.

Yet several of the questions that preoccupied Ellis Joffe's scholarly life persist: Is the PLA the armed servant of the Communist Party or of the Chinese state? And which should it be?

Clearly, Joffe was correct in his view that professional imperatives would sooner or later cause the PLA to modernize and professionalize. However, there was some justification for the recurrent criticism voiced by other PLA scholars (Harvey Nelsen, Jonathan Pollack and Paul Godwin, to name three prominent examples), who thought Joffe depicted "the PLA through rose-colored glasses." He tended to ignore corruption in the officer corps even when, in the late 1980s, the official PRC press was featuring it as a major problem. In *The Chinese Army after Mao* (1987), he wrote that unit party committees had been "abandoned."⁸ That was a considerable exaggeration. The roles of party committees and commissars in operations certainly appear to have diminished considerably, as Joffe expected. But they have continued to play prominent roles in indoctrination and in personnel promotion and assignment.

In the 1980s, and especially in the years following the June 1989 Tian'anmen crisis, some among the PLA-watching community believed there were "several" or even "many PLAs" – that it was comprised of potentially hostile armed camps. They pointed, in particular, to the continuing power of the seven military region commanders. Joffe categorically rejected this view. At the Second Staunton Hill Conference (September 1990), he maintained that, while the PLA was in flux and under stress, it remained a single entity held together by "professional ethics, hierarchy, and discipline." It was devoted to national unity, and would never allow China to come apart as had Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union.⁹

Joffe was fully aware of the minutiae of military hardware, and could speak and write about it quite knowledgeably, but he understood that the really important things about the PLA were its people and the way they related to the army, the military profession, the state and the Communist Party. He wrote widely on China's international relations, the influence of military developments on international affairs, and vice versa. In *China After the Gulf War* (May 1991) he clearly summarized the global political implications of the war. He also correctly

⁸ Ellis Joffe, *The Chinese Army after Mao* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

⁹ *Second Staunton Hill Conference on China's People's Liberation Army (PLA), Conference Proceedings*, Defense Academic Research Support Program, 6–8 September 1991, pp. 14–15.

predicted that the war would provide a powerful impetus for modernizing the PLA.¹⁰

In recent years, Elli repeatedly protested that he had nothing more to contribute – that there was no point in his writing another paper for another conference volume because everyone knew what he had to say. He was always invited anyway, because we just wanted him to be there, to contribute his wisdom on everything – not just civil–military relations. Moreover, he still had important things to write. Roy Kamphausen wrote:

I regard Ellie's chapter in the September 2007 *Right-Sizing the PLA*¹¹ volume ... to be perhaps his finest analysis ("China needs a military commensurate with its status" – it explains so much, but is so intangible at the same time.) And yet it was SO hard to get him to do it. "I have said all I can say. I will need to repeat myself. No one wants to hear what I have to say anymore" and so on. What I wouldn't give to have a chance again for some of the repartee.

There was a grain of truth in Joffe's self-deprecation; to the extent that the proposition for which he argued since the early 1960s has come to be generally accepted. As David Shambaugh wrote in 1999, the debate over party–army relations came to closure with Joffe's contribution to *The China Quarterly* in 1996.¹² "Joffe usefully reminds us that the PLA is, in his words, 'a party–army with professional characteristics.'"¹³ The PLA and the party had, by the late 1990s, separated institutionally, and in terms of their personnel. Joffe expected that, "Separation will strengthen its inclination to avoid political entanglement, which can only be inimical to its corporate well-being."¹⁴ In conversation Joffe put it more succinctly: Whereas the official formulation is that the PLA is a "modern professional army with Chinese characteristics," Elli turned it on its head, calling it a "Chinese army with professional characteristics."

To the best of my knowledge, Ellis Joffe's last published article appeared in the 16 March 2009 issue of *Far Eastern Economic Review*. It addressed the then recently concluded session of the National People's Congress that had approved still another double-digit boost to China's official defence budget. He wrote, "This fits with the existing trend of more than a decade, as the Chinese armed forces have been undergoing an intensive build-up that has substantially increased their combat capabilities. Although these capabilities had plummeted drastically during the Maoist period, no concerted modernization drive – primarily to acquire new weapons – was launched until after the Taiwan crisis of 1995/96, because the Chinese had perceived no strategic military threat to their

10 Ellis Joffe, *China after the Gulf War* (Kaohsiung, Taiwan: Sun Yat-sen Center for Policy Studies, 1991).

11 Ellis Joffe, "The right size for China's military: to what end," in Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell (eds), *Right-Sizing the PLA: Exploring the Contours of China's Military* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College, 2007).

12 Ellis Joffe, "Party–army relations in China: retrospect and prospect," in *China's Military in Transition*, special issue of *The China Quarterly*, No. 146 (June 1996), pp. 299–314.

13 David Shambaugh, "China's Post-Deng military leadership," in James R. Lilley and David Shambaugh (eds), *China's Military Faces the Future* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), p. 32.

14 Ellis Joffe, "Ruling China after Deng," *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* (Winter/Spring 1997), Vol.11, No. 1, p. 219, quoted in D. Shambaugh, "China's Post-Deng military leadership," in Lilley and Shambaugh (eds), *China's Military Faces the Future*, p. 32.

security.”¹⁵ As always, he was looking above and beyond the PLA to the big picture.

Beyond what he wrote himself (and the above comments don’t even scratch the surface of his scholarly production), Elli was a mentor to the rest of us. He was a charter member and senior elder of what I like to call the “Staunton Hill Gang.” This informal, highly congenial group gathers for one or more annual conferences that have, in Shambaugh’s words, “Become staples of the field: those sponsored by the Center for Advanced Policy Studies (Taipei) and its foreign partners (RAND since 1996), the American Enterprise Institute, Army War College, and the Staunton Hill gatherings.”¹⁶ The origins of this collection of academics, government officials, think tank researchers and private scholars reaches back (as well as I can recall) to a May 1983 conference in Garmisch Germany, organized by Gerald Segal and William Tow.¹⁷

Over the years the “Staunton Hill Gang” produced most of what the non-Chinese world now knows about the Chinese military. At our conferences, Elli was usually invited to present a paper on civil–military relations, sometimes in addition to Paul Godwin, Harvey Nelsen, David Shambaugh or even me. The conferences produced a succession of books and articles over the years, as well as a special issue of *The China Quarterly*.¹⁸ Elli wrote a significant part of it, but he was a constructive critical influence behind almost all of it. We wanted him in the room when we presented and defended our papers, because he would cut to the heart of things. If you said or wrote something stupid (I testify from experience here) Elli quickly shot you down, but he did in it in a way that encouraged you to improve and didn’t hurt your feelings too much. As Richard Baum wrote, “Incisive, witty, and (on occasion) acerbic, he could cut to the core of an issue with uncanny insight, humor, and precious little extraneous verbiage.”

The Man

More often than not, one who writes the obituary of a leading scholar has to tip-toe around personality faults, feuds and rough edges – to be wary of offending those whom the deceased may have wronged or offended. Thankfully, I don’t have that problem. I don’t know of anybody who knew Ellis Joffe who didn’t like him. To be sure, there are those with whom he had strong differences of opinion. But his unfailing civility, courtesy and amiability left little room for hurt feelings or resentment. Elli might disagree but he was never disagreeable, and he evoked the same in those around him. I guess the only character flaw I

15 “China’s military after Taiwan,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 16 March 2009.

16 David Shambaugh, “PLA studies today: a maturing field,” in James C. Mulvenon and Richard H. Yang (eds), *The People’s Liberation Army in the Information Age* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1999), p. 12.

17 The resulting book was Gerald Segal and William T. Tow (eds), *Chinese Defense Policy* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

18 “China’s Military in Transition,” special issue of *The China Quarterly*, No. 146 (June 1996).

can think of was that, despite his self-deprecating humour, he was sometimes a bit sensitive to criticism, which is hardly unique among scholars!

I first met Ellis Joffe at the Garmisch conference in May 1983. I was awed – not just by his already formidable reputation, but by his presence. He was a small, wiry, energetic man, with snow-white hair and an almost constant brilliant smile. I kept addressing him as “Professor Joffe” until he firmly directed me to call him “Elli.” Yet, when *The China Quarterly* asked me to write this obituary, I realized that, although I had known him nearly thirty years, there were aspects of Elli’s life of which I was completely ignorant. Whenever we talked about personal matters, it was always about *my* life, not his. Subsequently, I learned that the same was true with everybody else: Elli had little to say about his own personal life, but was always interested in ours. He could not hide that he had a “sensitive stomach” and had to watch his diet, but few of us knew he suffered from Crohn’s disease since his late twenties. Almost nobody knew about the cancer that recently was killing him: he just didn’t talk about it.

Realizing how little I knew about Elli’s life, I sent e-mails to several dozen colleagues asking for their assistance with biographical information and, if they wished, reminiscences. The response was literally a worldwide outpouring of messages and fond memories, many from a widening ripple of secondary and tertiary contacts. In an early response Paul Cohen wrote, “It seems that the recent communications back and forth among Ellis Joffe’s friends ... has created an imagined community of sorts. I’m currently in Hong Kong, but I heard via Merle Goldman that you were doing a piece on Ellis for *CQ* and were looking for stories.” There followed an anecdote about Elli’s authoritative help in resolving a problem with a student paper.

Tom Christensen wrote, “He had a huge professional impact on me, in part simply by taking me seriously while I was in grad school and giving me a little confidence. Eli was a very generous soul and a champion of the younger generations of scholars interested in these topics. I wonder if he knew how much it meant to us?”

Similarly, KP Ng remembered “... a caring ‘senpai’ who was always ready to support whole-heartedly junior and green scholars. ... I will never forget how he continued to give me support and guidance all through my career and life.”

Roy Kamphausen writes of an experience he shared with many of us. When he presented his first academic paper after retirement from the US Army at the CAPS-Rand conference in Taipei in December 2006, “Ellie was the discussant... and, in a role I am sure he played scores of times with others as well, was both encouraging and suggestive of ways to improve in the open session and in our personal discussion afterward. Words are hard to find that describe the feeling of elation that THE ELLIS JOFFE found something I had thought/written to be of merit.”

Jean-Pierre Cabestan contributed a wonderful European note: “I met Elie for the first time in Aarhus in 1982 at a conference organised by late Jurgen Domes: I was immediately seduced by Elie’s expertise, wittiness and culture. His friendship

with Jurgen Domes epitomized for me the post-war reconciliation and constructive Zeitgeist of the time. Apart from the US, he frequently travelled to Europe, was well known there and felt in many ways close to Europe.” He was an inspiration and a “real Mensch who will not be forgotten by his friends from Europe.”

Repeatedly, correspondents referred to Joffe’s wisdom. Christensen wrote, “I always saw Eli as not just smart and informed, but wise. There are lots of smart and informed people in the field, but wisdom is always in short supply.” Cabestan observed that, “Among the many PLA specialists that I have met, Elie was probably the wisest, always carefully pondering the progress and the lingering weaknesses of the Chinese armed forces, and also with a perfect logic deducing their priorities as well as their likely and unlikely actions.”

Elli was deeply concerned about the political situation in the Middle East. Like Jonathan Pollack, I well remember Elli’s sad, even cynical bemusement at what he regarded as the “stupid intransigence” (his words) of both Palestinian and Israeli politicians. David Zweig called him, “A voice of reason on this issue too.”

Announcing Elli’s passing to the CHINAPOL on-line community, Rick Baum wrote, “Ellie was witty, funny, unfailingly cheerful and polite, but intellectually rigorous.”

Paul Godwin wrote, “From my very personal point of view, what must occupy a major point in your obit is that Eli was a warm, compassionate person and a pleasure to be with. This isn’t much help, I know, but it is the first aspect of Eli that comes to mind when I think of him and the many hours we spent together over the past 30 years.”

Robert Elegant remembered Elli as, “Truly a gentle soul who contributed so much to our knowledge of the less gentle PLA and its ramifications.”

Michael Swaine remembered Elli as “...very kind and gracious, extremely witty, with a great sense of humor and always a ready joke or story to relate, an excellent public speaker, able to convey serious points while weaving in humorous anecdotes.... What I will remember the most about Elli, however, is his compassion and empathy. ... I think his relationship with Michal, his wife, was a solid anchor for him, although he did not speak of her much.... He was such a thoroughly decent, kind, warm, and generous soul. I will miss him hugely.”

Susan Puska remembered Elli as “generous and humble” and “always the voice of reason, challenging us to think carefully about the evidence—how do we know what we think we know? He was a model of critical thinking and cool objectivity.... After the PLA conference he and I exchanged emails about landscaping, my plans to start an executive MBA this year (he is one of few people who encouraged me), and mystery books we both liked.... In the last email I received, he wrote, ‘I had a stroke. I can’t write anymore. I am sorry.’ Just like him. Such a wonderful man.”

I fondly recall the Sunday morning at Carlisle Barracks when David Shambaugh presented Elli with the first copy of the previous year’s conference

papers, *China's Military faces the Future*,¹⁹ and announced that the book was “Dedicated to Ellis Joffe, Pioneer of PLA Studies.” Elli was kind of choked up by that. We really loved the man, and I think he really loved us.

About two years ago Yitzhak Shichor suggested to Elli that they should organize an international conference on the Chinese military in Jerusalem to mark his 75th birthday (June 2009) and bring along the “gang,” many of whom had never been to Israel. He was obviously moved, writes Shichor, “But needed to think about it. A couple of days later he told me he didn’t want it: ‘The emotional burden would be too heavy,’ he said. This was very typical of him. Eventually, it was in June 2009 that he was hospitalized and six months later he died.”²⁰

The last thought is from his dear wife Michal: “He was a good man, generous, sensitive to the wellbeing of others, and always ready to help those in need. He ... wouldn’t compromise his integrity for anything. ... He followed current events very closely. He loved books. Spent hours in book stores and never got tired of it. Except for professional material he loved to read mysteries, suspense and spy novels. He had a good sense of humor and knew how to tell a joke. He was a very good teacher, and captivated his students with his knowledge and charm.”

In recognition of Ellis Joffe’s contributions to the study of contemporary China, his friends and colleagues have established a book fund at the Fairbank Center, for the Fairbank Center Collection in the Fung Library. Donations to this fund may be made to the Fairbank Center and sent to Susan McHone at Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, Harvard University, 1730 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA.

19 James R. Lilley and David Shambaugh (eds.), *China's Military Faces the Future* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999).

20 Email message from Yitzhak Shichor, 17 April 2010.