

ELIZABETH KIER

Imagining War

*French and British Military Doctrine
between the Wars*



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IMAGINING WAR

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IMAGINING WAR

FRENCH AND BRITISH MILITARY
DOCTRINE BETWEEN THE WARS

Elizabeth Kier

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To my parents, Mary and Porter

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IMAGINING WAR

Introduction

CHOICES between offensive and defensive military doctrines affect both the likelihood that wars will break out and the outcome of wars that have already begun. World War I illustrates tragically how offensive military postures can help transform crises into wars, and the French army's rapid and devastating defeat in the opening battles of World War II exemplifies all that can go wrong on the battlefield.¹ Neither the destabilizing consequences of offensive doctrines nor the dangers of poorly designed military doctrines disappeared with the end of the cold war. Defensive doctrines do not erase ethnic hostilities or suspend territorial appetites, but their adoption could help remove one of the structural impediments to cooperation in the post-cold war world. The conduct of wars continues to be vital to state security.

Although we understand the importance of military doctrine, we are less certain why a state chooses to adopt either an offensive or a defensive doctrine. Contrary to conventional wisdom, I argue that doctrinal developments are best understood from a cultural perspective. My focus on ideational factors is the first important theme in this book: there are not definitive meanings attached to an objective empirical reality. As important as material factors may be, they can be interpreted in numerous ways. This view has important implications for understanding much of our political world.² We should not assume that interests are self-evident or that political actors from the same socioeconomic groups prefer the same policies across national boundaries. Making sense of how structure matters or what incentives it provides often requires understanding the meanings that actors attach to their material world.

In addition, although civilian decisions are important in developing doctrine, the intervention of civilian policymakers is rarely a carefully calculated response to the external environment. Instead, civilian choices between different military policies often reflect their concerns about the *domestic* balance of power. This is the second principal theme in this book. International relations scholars should not view civilian choices about military policy exclusively in terms of the foreign policy or the strategic requirements of the state. Few issues within the state are more politicized than questions about who has the support and control of the most important component of a state's material power.

Warfare and the army are tied inextricably to the state-building process. Given the latent power of the armed services, state actors seek to ensure that the military's potential strength corresponds to the desired

division of power in the state and society. The British Parliament, worried that a strong standing army would once again threaten English liberties, refused to allow the military to become independent of legislative control. The critical divide in France was not between the Parliament and the Crown, as it was in England, but instead reflected class divisions. The conservative, industrial, and landowning classes felt that only a professional army could ensure social stability and the preservation of the status quo, while labor and center-left parties stressed that only a conscript army could guarantee republican liberties.

Civilian decisions about the military may neglect the structure of the international system, but civilians are not oblivious to issues of power. The domestic implications of military policy are especially important in states that have not reached a consensus about the role of the armed services in the domestic arena. If there is controversy, civilians address their concerns about the domestic distribution of power before they consider the structure of the international system. However, if civilians agree about the domestic role of the armed services, their intervention is more likely to reflect systemic imperatives. Either way, civilian preferences are not given; understanding their cultural beliefs about the role of the armed forces in the domestic arena explains why similar actors choose different military policies in different national settings.

But a cultural approach applies to military organizations as well as to civilian policymakers. Decisions within organizations are framed by their perception of the world, and this is particularly true of military organizations. Required to work as a cohesive group and perform what are often selfless tasks, military organizations develop strong collective understandings about the nature of their work and the conduct of their mission, and these organizational cultures influence their choices between offensive and defensive military doctrines.

However, not all military organizations have the same culture. For example, in the early cold war years the German army's view of warfare as a creative activity contrasted sharply with the American army's more managerial approach: a group of German officers criticized American army manuals for what they saw as a dangerous tendency to try to foresee all possible scenarios.³ Similarly, the ideal officer can range from the modern-day business manager to the warrior or heroic leader.⁴ After the War of Independence, for example, the Israeli army avoided the British emphasis on parade ground drills and instead stressed combat skills and the "paratroop spirit," requiring each of its officers to undergo jump training.⁵ In other words, militaries' cultures can differ, and these differences often account for their doctrinal preferences. In particular, the military's culture shapes how the organization responds to constraints set by

civilian policymakers. The organizational culture alone does not explain doctrinal change; the military's culture intervenes between civilian decisions and military doctrine.

In short, the interaction between constraints set in the domestic political arena and a military's organizational culture determines choices between offensive and defensive military doctrines. Fearful about domestic threats and instability, civilians endorse military options that they think will ensure the preferred distribution of power at the domestic level. These civilian views about the organizational form of the army then constrain a military's choice between an offensive and a defensive doctrine. Other militaries would neither see the same cause-and-effect relationships nor judge the same factors to be important, but constrained within an organization with powerful assimilating mechanisms, the officer corps imagines only certain alternatives.

In arguing that culture significantly affects choices between offensive and defensive military doctrines, this book challenges much of the previous work on the origins of military doctrine. Scholars working within a rationalist perspective credit civilian policymakers with formulating military doctrines that are well suited to the state's strategic environment, yet blame the armed services for adopting offensive doctrines tailored to their organizational interests.⁶ This is an inaccurate portrait of the role of the military and of civilians in the development of a state's military doctrine. It exaggerates the wisdom of civilian intervention and the myopia of military organizations. Balance-of-power theory may help us understand some aspects of the choice between an offensive and a defensive doctrine, but the argument that civilian intervention brings doctrine in line with systemic imperatives misses what civilian policymakers often care most about. Similarly, the argument that military organizations—for reasons of size, autonomy, and prestige—inherently prefer offensive doctrines suffers from many of the problems that often limit functional arguments. A functional view of the military fails to capture the variety in organizational preferences that a cultural analysis reveals.

In using a cultural approach to examine the origins of choices between offensive and defensive doctrines, I hope to insert this book into the debate in the social sciences between cultural, constructivist, and sociological analyses and the more conventional structural, functional, and rationalist approaches. Unlike most rationalists, who take preferences as given and interests as self-evident, I show how actors' cultures help define their interests. Independent exigencies such as technology, geography, and the distribution of power are important, but culture is not simply derivative of functional demands or structural imperatives. Culture has an independent causal role in the formation of preferences.

This is especially true in choices between offensive and defensive military doctrines. Understanding military choices requires moving away from functional analyses and toward an analysis of how the culture of a military organization affects its choices. Similarly, civilians do not conceive of the military needs of their state exclusively according to material or structural incentives, but also, and perhaps more important, according to how certain military policies will affect the domestic distribution of power. By adopting a cultural approach, we can better understand the origins of military doctrine, and in doing so, move one step closer to controlling a potential source of international instability.

Plan of the Book

The first two chapters provide the theoretical foundations for my argument about the origins of offensive and defensive military doctrines. Chapter 1 introduces the question of doctrinal change by focusing on Barry Posen's and Jack Snyder's pathbreaking studies on military doctrine. Their work provides powerful explanations for doctrinal change and provoked many of the questions addressed in this book. Nevertheless, Chapter 1 challenges their two central propositions. I first question balance-of-power theory's ability to explain choices between offensive and defensive doctrines and then raise doubts about whether military organizations inherently prefer offensive doctrines.

Chapter 2 presents my argument about the cultural sources of military doctrine. First, I discuss why civilian decisions often respond to concerns about the domestic balance of power and how culture frames these civilian decisions. I explain why the degree of consensus among civilian policymakers about the role of the armed forces in the domestic arena affects both civilian responsiveness to systemic constraints and culture's causal role. Second, Chapter 2 discusses what a military's organizational culture is, why we should expect military organizations to have particularly strong cultures, and how these cultures influence the development of military doctrine.

The empirical chapters will show culture's causal power, but they also illustrate how easily we can confuse cultural factors that have causal autonomy with cultural beliefs that entrepreneurs manipulate for political purposes. Because of this danger, as well as the potential problem that culture may reflect situational factors (and so have no independent causal weight), it is important to design research projects that isolate culture's causal role. Viewing world politics from the perspective of actors—that is, from the inside—does not mean that rigor must be abandoned. Chapter 2 discusses how this study provides a persuasive test of culture's

explanatory power. I draw lessons from previous work on political culture and explain the benefits of testing this cultural argument in case studies of doctrinal developments in Britain and France during the interwar period. The chapter closes with a brief discussion of several questions that must be addressed before assigning causal weight to cultural factors.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine doctrinal developments in the French army during the 1920s and 1930s. Chapter 3 begins with a description of the French army's doctrine and then critiques the two most important alternative explanations for the French army's adoption of a defensive doctrine in the 1930s. First, it is wrong to believe that the French army mindlessly reapplied the defensive lessons of the Great War; its preference for a defensive doctrine cannot be explained away as an overreaction to the bloody defensive stalemate of World War I. Throughout the 1920s, the French officer corps adopted offensive war plans, planned for the offensive use of fortifications, and debated the offensive potential of mechanized warfare. Second, despite compelling and well-understood international constraints, French civilians did not behave as expected by balance-of-power theory. When deciding on the army's organizational form, French civilians responded to domestic, not international, threats.

Chapter 4 explains why the sources of French doctrine are found in the interaction between domestic politics and the French army's organizational culture. Two competing groups in French politics had highly developed beliefs about which type of army best suited the desired domestic political arrangements. The Right worried that a conscript army would not guarantee social stability and the preservation of law and order, while the Left feared that a professional army would do the bidding of the conservative and antirepublican forces in society. Driven by this concern, the center and left-wing parties reduced the length of conscription to one year.

This civilian decision to rely on a conscript army did not, however, determine French army doctrine. Civilians established the organizational form of the army, but it was the French army's organizational culture that sealed France's fate. Another military organization could have responded differently to a constraint that, in the French army's eyes, left it with only one option. Despite its experiences with the German army, the French officer corps could not imagine executing an offensive doctrine with short-term conscripts and reserve forces. As a result, after the parliamentary decision to reduce the length of conscription to one year, the French army adopted a defensive doctrine.

Chapters 5 and 6 analyze doctrinal developments in Britain during the same period. Chapter 5 describes British army and air force doctrines and discusses why the conventional explanations for their development

are inadequate. British civilians did not ignore systemic imperatives, but balance-of-power theory cannot explain much of their behavior: British civilians did not try to reform their antiquated army to bring it up to continental standards, and by refusing to make a military commitment on the European continent until 1939, civilians did not give the army the one role that would have encouraged it to prepare to meet a German assault. British civilians made these decisions even though they saw Germany as Britain's greatest threat. Similarly, with the exception of Royal Air Force (RAF) support for strategic bombing, few of the British armed services' choices fit the pattern expected by a functional analysis of military organizations. The RAF also developed and adopted a defensive doctrine; the British army stubbornly refused to adopt an offensive doctrine that would have served its parochial interests; and all three services showed startling budgetary restraint.

Chapter 6 presents my argument about the cultural origins of British army doctrine during the 1920s and 1930s. Because British civilians agreed about which types of military organizations best suited Britain's democratic institutions, civilian decisions were more likely to correspond with systemic pressures and constraints. British civilians sought to ensure the strength of Britain's "fourth arm of defense"—the British economy. Fearful that a weak economy would invite aggressive action in peacetime and cripple Britain's mobilization capacity during war, British civilians kept British defense expenditures to a minimum. Tight civilian control of military expenditures also reflected domestic concerns: in the government's eyes, British domestic stability could ill afford rampant inflation and labor unrest. When it came to choosing strategic policies, British civilians invariably chose the cheapest alternative.

Fears about disrupting the domestic distribution of power also shaped civilian decisions about the basic form of the military, and those decisions later constrained doctrinal developments. British civilians feared that a professional military caste might threaten English liberties; London was content to retain an amateur army befitting an imperial outpost. This reluctance to bring the army up to continental standards meant that the British army had an organizational culture reminiscent of nineteenth-century warfare. Although not a threat to parliamentary sovereignty, the basic assumptions, values, norms, beliefs, and formal knowledge in the British army's culture made it unable to make sense of the revolutionary changes taking place on the modern battlefield. Faced with what it perceived as few options, the British army adopted a defensive doctrine.

Chapter 7 reviews my argument and returns to the evidence of culture's explanatory power. We see that the cultural variables presented are not epiphenomenal or used instrumentally by political actors. We can

have confidence that culture affects choices between offensive and defensive doctrines. What we do not know and what this book does not address are the sources of the military's culture itself. I discuss some of the possible sources of a military's culture and why lessons learned from research on organizations in the private sector may not be appropriate for understanding the origins of a military's culture. This chapter closes with a discussion of how to change a military's culture.

Structure, Function, and Military Doctrine

MANY SCHOLARS have sought to understand the origins of, and more frequently, the barriers to doctrinal change in the military.¹ These analysts usually examine a specific example of military doctrine and explore the role that technology, defeat in war, and civilian intervention play in doctrinal change.² However, the publication of Barry Posen's and Jack Snyder's studies focused attention on the sources of military doctrine.³

Posen and Snyder's books have become classic studies of the origins of offensive and defensive military doctrines. Although they disagree on the role of domestic politics and the explanatory weight of organizational factors, Posen and Snyder agree on two major points: (1) that civilian intervention is good because it corresponds to the objective strategic interests of the state, and (2) that military organizations, for reasons of autonomy, resources, certainty, and prestige, inherently prefer offensive doctrines. Civilians are trumpeted as the champions of the national interest and the principal architects of well-integrated military plans. The military is portrayed as pursuing its organizational interests and adopting offensive doctrines that may be poorly integrated with the state's grand strategy.

This chapter challenges both propositions. Although realism and a functional view of military organizations contribute to an understanding of the sources of military doctrine, neither adequately accounts for choices between offensive and defensive doctrines. Both provide explanations that are indeterminate of choices between offensive and defensive military doctrines and fail to capture the sources of civilian and military interests in doctrinal developments. By focusing on the theoretical limitations of realist and functional explanations, this chapter sets up the empirical critiques in the case study chapters.

Civilians and the International System

Realism expects systemic constraints and opportunities to shape civilian understandings of state goals and civilian intervention in the development of doctrine.⁴ The parochial interests of the military may govern doctrinal decisions in low-threat environments, but as the international system becomes more threatening, balance-of-power theorists expect

civilians to intervene in doctrinal developments, overrule the military's self-interested choices, and realign military doctrine in accordance with systemic imperatives. For example, Posen argues that civilian intervention in doctrinal developments best explains the Royal Air Force's adoption of an air defense system in the 1930s. According to Posen, although the air force championed strategic bombing (an offensive doctrine) as the key to British security, British civilians responded to the growing German threat in the 1930s by forcing the RAF to develop the innovative defensive doctrine that later won the Battle of Britain.⁵ Similarly, Snyder argues that the absence of civilian intervention allows the military to adopt self-serving doctrines poorly suited to the state's strategic environment. Snyder claims, for example, that the lack of civilian control in the early 1900s allowed two regional commanders in Russia to adopt an overly ambitious and ill-conceived offensive war plan.⁶

Both Posen and Snyder believe that the international system provides accurate cues for civilian intervention in the development of doctrine.⁷ Posen argues that civilians actively respond to systemic constraints, and Snyder, although more cautious, agrees that certain doctrinal responses correspond to particular systemic conditions. Snyder argues that military biases shape doctrinal choices, but he also maintains that the more ambiguous the strategic incentives, the greater the impact of institutional biases.⁸ If systemic directives are transparent, then a rational doctrine—one that is well attuned to international considerations—results.

This argument about the role of civilians and the international system exaggerates the power of systemic imperatives and misses what civilian policymakers often care most about. First, as many realists recognize, the structure of the international system is indeterminate of choices between offensive and defensive doctrines. Second, even during periods of international threat, civilians rarely intervene in doctrinal developments, and when they do, their decisions are often damaging to the state's strategic objectives. Third, as discussed in Chapter 2, civilian intervention is often a response to domestic political concerns, not to the distribution of power in the international system.

The International System Is Indeterminate

Although revisionist states require offensive doctrines, both offensive and defensive doctrines can defend the status quo. Even the prospect of fighting a two-front war provides several alternatives. The Schlieffen Plan's double offensive is one possibility, but as Jack Snyder pointed out, Germany could also have chosen "a positional defense of the short frontier in the west, combined with either a counteroffensive or a positional

defense in the east.”⁹ Some military analysts claim that even Israel is not compelled to adopt an offensive doctrine. For example, Ariel Levite argues that the assertion that Israel’s geostrategic position demands an offensive doctrine is “flawed principally because it fails to distinguish between choice and compulsion.”¹⁰ The Israeli army did adopt an offensive doctrine, but Israel’s position in the international system did not require this choice.

A state’s position in the international system is indeterminate of choices between offensive and defensive military doctrines. For example, France’s relative weakness during the interwar period led to the endorsement of an offensive orientation during the 1920s and a defensive orientation in the 1930s. Neither option was wrong-headed or ignorant of systemic constraints: both were rational responses to relative weakness. In the 1920s, the French sought to avoid a long war by striking offensively and quickly terminating the war before Germany could mobilize its superior economic strength. In the 1930s, the French responded to Germany’s relative strength with a defensive doctrine. Their reasoning again makes sense: hold off the German assault long enough to allow for the injection of allied support. In other words, both offensive and defensive doctrines may correspond to the systemic imperatives of a relatively weak state.¹¹

The indeterminacy of the international system makes clear why dramatic doctrinal shifts can occur in the absence of systemic variation, or why changes in the international system do not necessarily lead to shifts in states’ doctrinal orientations. Although both the French and the British armies shifted from offensive to defensive doctrines between 1914 and 1939, conditions in the international system remained relatively static from one period to the next. Similarly, the U.S. Army’s official endorsement of Airland Battle in 1982 changed American doctrine from a defensive to an offensive orientation, despite the lack of significant transformation in the international system.¹² Conversely, although India’s strategic position changed dramatically upon independence in 1947, the Indian army did not begin to shed the doctrinal orientation of its British predecessor until the early 1980s.¹³

Civilian Intervention Is Unusual and Can Hinder the Development of Doctrine

During the interwar period, French and British civilians were not active participants in the formation of military doctrine. Their decisions were important, but they did not directly choose the doctrinal orientation of the military. The French Parliament’s decision in 1928 to reduce the length of conscription to one year affected doctrinal developments, but

even after Hitler's rise to power French civilians did not directly choose the army's doctrine. Similarly, the British Cabinet and the parliament did not concern themselves with army doctrine. In his study of French, German, and Russian military doctrine before World War I, Snyder also found that civilians played only an indirect role in military planning.¹⁴

In addition, civilian intervention can be counterproductive.¹⁵ Given the antagonistic relations between civilians and the military in France during the 1930s, civilian intervention in doctrinal development was probably the best way to guarantee that a change would *not* occur. In 1936, Charles de Gaulle, then a colonel in the French army, sought the aid of a parliamentarian, Paul Reynaud, in his quest for the adoption of an offensive doctrine. As a result, de Gaulle's reputation within the army plummeted: as Edward Pognon explains, "Rare, very rare are those among [de Gaulle's] comrades who were not scandalized by his appeal to a politician."¹⁶ The following year the high command dropped de Gaulle from the promotion list in part to demonstrate its displeasure with his ideas and his appeal for civilian support.¹⁷ Far from fostering doctrinal innovation, civilian intervention frustrated de Gaulle's efforts.

Whereas balance-of-power theory anticipates that civilian intervention will promote doctrine well attuned to systemic imperatives, civilian choices disrupted the French air force's fledgling development. During the 1920s and early 1930s, the French air force focused on ground support and especially reconnaissance for the army. It debated the value of strategic bombing, but not until the civilian Pierre Cot became the minister of air in 1936 did its emphasis shift decisively from cooperation with the army to strategic bombing missions. Yet civilian support for strategic bombing did not last; the next year Cot shifted the air force's priority back to ground support, and his successor in 1938, Guy La Chambre, reinforced Cot's new position.¹⁸ This inconsistency and instability in the air force's development, caused largely by civilian intervention, contributed to disarray in the French air force. When World War II began, the French air force's primary mission was ground support, but it did not have a well-developed doctrine or tactics, and it lacked the appropriate materiel.¹⁹

Hitler's Germany: An Easy Case for Realism

Doctrinal development in Germany before World War II should be an easy case for a realist analysis. Hitler actively participated in military affairs, and his foreign policy objectives provide a determinant prediction: revisionist states need offensive doctrines.²⁰ In fact, during the 1960s, several English historians argued that Hitler and the army high command recognized that Germany could not fight a long war and, as a result,

developed a special strategy designed to gain quick, decisive victories.²¹ This coordination between social and economic constraints and military doctrine is evidence, Posen argues, of the wisdom of civilian intervention. Recognizing the constraints facing Germany, Hitler imposed the blitzkrieg doctrine on a reluctant army.

But this conclusion exaggerates Hitler's strategic vision. Hitler supported the army's efforts, and as John Mearsheimer has detailed, Hitler's decision to adopt the blitzkrieg battle plan in 1940 was decisive, but civilian intervention did not cause the German army to adopt an offensive doctrine.²² As Robert O'Neill and Williamson Murray argue, the German army supported the development of offensive armored warfare, and Hitler remained in the background of doctrinal developments until January 1938. The German high command financed the development of armored forces and allowed the advocates of mechanized warfare to develop their ideas and train forces largely free of outside interference.²³ As early as 1929, tank warfare dominated the modernization of the German army. A historian of the German army, Michael Geyer, explained that "the general staff, led by the 'Young Turks' around Stülpnagel and Blomberg and supported by specialists like Bockelbert (procurement, weapons development) as well as Heinz Guderian (weapons inspectorate) wholeheartedly embraced the concept of decision-oriented, operationally independent tank warfare." In addition, recent research by British, American, and German scholars questions the degree of coordination between German political, economic, and military strategy. Murray explains that "in reality, almost no connection existed between Germany's economic problems and the development of *blitzkrieg* warfare." Indeed, research on German economic conditions before the outbreak of war suggests that Hitler had little understanding of the potential relationship between economics and military doctrine.²⁴

I am not arguing that civilian decisions are unimportant in the development of doctrine. However, as Chapter 2 explains, civilian decisions on military policy often respond to concerns about the balance of power in the *domestic* arena, not in the international system. For example, the French Parliament's decision in 1928 to reduce the term of conscription to one year constrained subsequent doctrinal developments in the French army, yet this decision responded to domestic concerns, not to France's weak position, a resurgent Germany, or the needs of alliance diplomacy.

The Military and Offensive Doctrines

Posen and Snyder expect civilians to wisely adjust military doctrine to conform with national objectives, but they see military organizations choosing doctrines that serve the military's parochial interests. In partic-

ular, they argue that offensive doctrines are powerful tools in a military organization's pursuit of greater autonomy, resources, certainty, and prestige.²⁵ For example, Posen argues that the greater complexity involved in the execution of offensive doctrines justifies increased expenditures, and Snyder claims that quick, decisive, and offensive campaigns enhance the army's prestige and self-image. According to a functional logic, these beneficial consequences are the essential cause of that behavior. Militaries prefer offensive doctrines because they expect to benefit from their adoption. Stephen Van Evera concludes that militaries "may adopt defensive strategies if civilians demand them, but without civilian direction they almost invariably purvey offensive ideas, and develop offensive solutions."²⁶

The argument that military organizations inherently prefer offensive doctrines is surprisingly weak. Offensive doctrines often serve the interests of military organizations, but we cannot conclude from this that military organizations choose offensive doctrines because they have this effect. Many of the goals that are posited as leading to the choice of offensive doctrines can be satisfied with either an offensive or a defensive doctrine. Even if these goals were not indeterminate, military organizations sometimes forfeit their attainment. This has happened even when choosing a particular doctrine would have increased a service's budget. Both the British and French cases provide illustrations of military organizations rejecting doctrinal options that could have brought them greater resources. Finally, without civilian prompting, military organizations sometimes ostracize officers who advocate a more *offensive* orientation, and instead willingly and dogmatically endorse *defensive* doctrines.

The Indeterminacy of Functional Logic

Both offensive and defensive doctrines can satisfy many of the goals held by military organizations.²⁷ Posen and Snyder argue that the military's desire to reduce uncertainty encourages the adoption of offensive doctrines, but defensive doctrines can also structure the battlefield and reduce the need to improvise. Before World War II, an integral aspect of the French army's defensive doctrine was what the French termed *la bataille conduite*—the "methodical battle." Instead of allowing for initiative and flexibility, *la bataille conduite* was tightly controlled and all units adhered to strictly scheduled timetables. As a German officer explained, "French tactics are essentially characterized by a systematization which seeks to anticipate and account for any eventuality in the smallest detail."²⁸ The French army's *defensive* doctrine maximized the centralization of command and reduced spontaneity to a minimum. During the same period, the British army's defensive doctrine also stressed