

# THE IDEOLOGY OF THE OFFENSIVE

MILITARY DECISION MAKING  
AND THE DISASTERS OF 1914

JACK SNYDER

CORNELL STUDIES IN SECURITY AFFAIRS

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THE DISASTERS OF 1914

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## *Preface*

The disastrous offensives of August 1914 constitute one of history's great unsolved puzzles. Why did the military strategists of Europe's major continental powers choose to defy the inexorable constraints of time, space, and technology, which so heavily favored the defensive? This book explains their strategic doctrines in terms of three components: rational calculation, bias that reflects the influence of parochial interests on perception and policy, and bias that results from the need to simplify complex decisions.

I believe that this perspective provides a persuasive new way of interpreting the events that led to the offensive disasters of 1914. But I also have hopes that it will prove effective when applied to the origins of offensive strategies in other times and other places. Understanding the military's urge to plan for offensive war is of the very greatest urgency, for I believe that offensive strategies in themselves increase the likelihood that wars will be fought.

None of the simple explanations for the epidemic of bad strategy that racked Europe in 1914 is satisfactory. Although France, Germany, and Russia did not favor the status quo, their offensive military plans were designed primarily as protection against conquest by others rather than as instruments of conquest. Offense they erroneously considered the best defense.

It is not true, as some commentators have argued, that the offensives were sound strategy and almost succeeded. The Germans came closest to success, but only because of inadvertent help from an ill-conceived French offensive. Nor is it true that logistical limitations and the strategic implications of defensive firepower were unforeseeable. Numerous military experts had read the operational lessons of the Boer and Russo-Japanese wars more or less correctly, and the war planners themselves often had a good sense of the difficulties that these factors

would cause for their offensives. It is also misleading to see the campaigns of August 1914 as the result of some transnational “cult of the offensive”—a military expression of a social Darwinist zeitgeist, Bergsonian *élan vital*, cultural despair, or romantic atavism that characterized the whole epoch. As late as 1910 Russia had an extremely defensive war plan, and France a relatively defensive one.

Historians who have studied the war planning of individual countries offer more helpful insights into the sources of offensive strategies, but even their work entails two main shortcomings. One is the tendency to describe and evaluate rather than to explain. We are told, for example, that Alfred von Schlieffen’s errors as a strategist stemmed from his narrow, dogmatic application of traditional German operational principles, but we are not told why German strategists found those principles so attractive and why dogmatization occurred. Similarly, the French historians of the “nation-in-arms school” have shown us that the *offensive à outrance* was somehow linked to the denigration of French reservists and the misreading of German plans, but the polemical aims of these writers distracted them from the analytical goal of disentangling cause and effect.

Historians of single countries have a second shortcoming. They fail to express their insights in general terms, so that their findings might be compared across countries or across time. Absorbed with the idiosyncrasies of their own cases, these historians miss the common thread that explains the offensive bias of all of the European powers—namely, the parochial interests and outlook of military professionals.

The failed offensives of 1914 pose more than a purely historical puzzle. Students of nuclear strategy such as Herman Kahn and Thomas Schelling have often viewed the July Crisis as a parable for our own age, showing how offensive strategies and the belief in a first-strike advantage can lead states to attack preemptively even when their motive is self-defense. More recently, such political scientists as Robert Jervis and George Quester have elaborated on these suggestions, tracing a number of ways in which offensive strategies and force postures make war more likely by promoting a Hobbesian competition for scarce security. These authors have often proceeded as if technology itself were the source of the trouble—that is, war will be more likely when military technology makes attacking easier than defending. This book casts doubt on their view. Strategic instability in 1914 was caused not by military technology, which favored the defender and provided no first-strike advantage, but by offensive war plans that defied technological constraints. The lesson here is that

doctrines can be destabilizing even when weapons are not, since doctrine may be more responsive to the organizational needs of the military than to the implications of the prevailing weapon technology. This conclusion is supported by recent investigations of strategic planning in various historical settings. Especially notable are Barry Posen's *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Cornell University Press, 1984) and Stephen Van Evera's "The Causes of War" (University of California at Berkeley dissertation, 1984).

Finally, readers interested in the questions raised by this book will also want to consult the summer 1984 issue of *International Security*, which includes an article by Stephen Van Evera on "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War" as well as my own article, "Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984." Both stress the role of offensive strategies as a cause of the war, and thus they underscore the importance of understanding the origin of these offensives and the conditions under which offensive bias might recur in our own era.

Hypotheses about the sources of strategic doctrine, which are derived from cognitive and organizational theories of the decision-making process, are outlined in Chapter 1. This introductory chapter also lays out the historical puzzle that is to be explained and discusses the comparative methods that are used to test the three theories. Chapters 2, 4, and 6 explain the adoption of offensive strategies in France, Germany, and Russia, respectively. They respond to a series of standard questions asked of each of the cases. Chapters 3, 5, and 7 are organized chronologically. Each provides detailed evidence supporting the argument advanced in the preceding chapter. The French chapters make extensive use of material from the Archives de la Guerre in Paris. The German chapters rely almost entirely on published sources, which are plentiful because of the widespread interest that the German case has provoked. The Russian chapters were enriched by research in the Lenin Library in Moscow, but the author had no access to Soviet archives. A great deal of the evidence about Russian war planning is taken from works published in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s. Although this Russian material is available in the United States, it has nonetheless been poorly exploited by Western scholars. The evidence presented in these chapters, even apart from the interpretations offered, should be of considerable interest to historians. The concluding chapter makes comparisons among the cases and discusses the implications of the findings for theories of decision making and international conflict.

*Preface*

I am grateful for the helpful comments and criticisms received from Michael Brown, Elliot Cohen, Ronald Cole, Roger Haydon, Robert Jervis, Michael Mandelbaum, John Mearsheimer, Steven Miller, Barry Posen, A. L. Ross, Warner Schilling, Nina Tamarkin Snyder, Stephen Van Evera, and Samuel Williamson. Financial and institutional support was received from the Peace Studies Program of Cornell University, the International Research and Exchanges Board, the Hubert Humphrey Fellowship of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, and the Center for International Affairs of Harvard University. Michael and Nicholas Daniloff generously allowed me to make use of General Iurii N. Danilov's unpublished papers.

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*New York City*

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# [1]

## *Military Bias and Offensive Strategy*

All of the major continental powers entered World War I with offensive strategies; all suffered huge strategic costs when, predictably, their offensives failed to achieve their ambitious aims. These failed offensives created political and operational difficulties that haunted the states throughout the war. Germany's Schlieffen Plan, for example, helped bring Britain into the war, provoking the protracted naval blockade that the Germans had hoped to avoid. Similarly, the miscarriage of France's Plan 17 allowed Germany to occupy large portions of northeastern France, hindering the operation of the French wartime economy and making more difficult a negotiated settlement on the basis of the status quo ante. Finally, the annihilation of the Russian forces invading East Prussia squandered troops that might have produced decisive results if concentrated on the Austrian front. Each of these countries would thus have been in a better position to secure an acceptable outcome if it had fought the war defensively from the beginning.

The offensive strategies had another, more profound cost: the war might never have occurred had the advantages of the defender been better appreciated. States would have understood that maintaining their security did not require preventive attacks on others. The lure of conquest (in any event a secondary motive for the offensives) would have been diminished if its difficulties had been more clearly recognized.<sup>1</sup>

The adoption of these offensives cannot be explained in terms of a rational strategic calculus. As the Boer and Russo-Japanese wars had foreshadowed, the tactical and logistical technologies of this era strongly favored the defender. In no case did geopolitical considerations decisively outweigh the technological advantages of a defensive



strategy. Likewise, aggressive national aims are inadequate as an explanation for deciding upon the ill-fated offensives of 1914. While none of the major continental states could be described as strictly favoring the status quo, the overriding criterion used by top military planners was security, not conquest.

The choice of offensive strategies by the continental powers was primarily the result of organizational biases and doctrinal oversimplifications of professional military planners. Some causes of offensive bias may have been common to all countries. The decisive sources of bias, however, were peculiar to each case, rooted in specific interests, preconceptions, and circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

Of the three largest continental powers, the French chose the least rational strategy. Technology, geography, and the need to coordinate with Russian efforts should all have pushed them strongly toward the defensive, but offensive bias overshadowed these incentives. The source of this bias was the military's organizational interest in preventing the professional army from being turned into a training cadre for a mass army composed of civilian reservists. Since everyone agreed that French reservists were good only for defense, the military fought institutional change by touting the indispensability of the offense. For the same reasons, they discounted the significance of German reservists, an intelligence failure that had near-fatal consequences in August 1914. In the aftermath of the venomous Dreyfus affair, institutional protection became an overwhelming concern for the French military and a powerful source of bias that had no equal in Germany or Russia.

Germany's geopolitical circumstances offered a clear incentive neither for offense nor for defense. Because of Russia's slow mobilization, a rapid German offensive had some chance of beating France and Russia piecemeal, before Russia's full weight could be brought to bear. A quick victory would have been difficult, however, because of the defender's tactical and logistical advantages. On the other hand, a German defensive strategy, based on an impregnable line of fortifications on the short Franco-German border, could not have offered quick victory either, but it would have provided two major advantages. First, if Germany had fought a strictly defensive war, Britain would not have had sufficient motive to join the Franco-Russian war effort. Second, with France checked by a German defense line, Russia would have been easier to deter or defeat.

Yet parochial interests and a parochial outlook would lead the German military to denigrate defensive alternatives. The extraordinary prestige of the German army rested on its historical ability to deliver