

Matthias Strohn, The German Army and the Defense of the Reich: Military Doctrine and the Conduct of the Defensive Battle 1918-1939, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Matt Bucholtz

For decades historical research dedicated to the study of the German army, or *Reichswehr*, before the Second World War has been dominated by a single overriding question: How did the German army create *Blitzkrieg*? Studies, both popular and academic, have focused on German offensive doctrine and the leading figures responsible for its creation, in an attempt to understand the stunning German victories of the first half of the Second World War. While this has led to a fuller appreciation of the various characteristics of combined arms warfare, it has also generated a skewed vision of the German army that does not accurately portray its operation, activities, strategic outlook, and doctrinal breadth. Matthias Strohn's work, The German Army and the Defense of the Reich provides a much-needed counter-weight to the existing 'Blitzkrieg' centric historiography of the *Reichswehr* between the First and Second World Wars.

Strohn reconstructs the role of defensive warfare as a part of an overall examination of strategic planning as well as the generation of military doctrine. No book on the German army would be complete without a section relating to Carl von Clausewitz, and Strohn does not disappoint. Beginning with a brief examination of the historical roots of defensive warfare and Prussian/German military thought, Strohn explores Clausewitz's most influential statements on the defense and their relation to

German military planning leading up to the First World War. While the author is not attempting a grand revision of the prevailing view of the offensively focused German army, Strohn successfully demonstrates that even under the stewardship of Helmuth von Moltke the Elder and Alfred von Schlieffen, the German army did not neglect defensive thought as it comprised a major occupation for military planners and theorists.

Beginning with his analysis of the military-political situation confronting Germany after defeat in the First World War, Strohn's mastery of the German archival sources becomes readily apparent. One of the major strengths of this work is the pairing of internal military and civilian analysis of contemporary strategic situations with the generation of military doctrine to produce a holistic view of policy-strategy creation. For the Weimar and Nazi eras this approach serves to highlight several key phases of military planning as well as varying levels of civil-military cooperation and coordination. The terms of the Treaty of Versailles, as well as the political turmoil of the revolutionary years imposed harsh new strategic realities on the vastly diminished *Reichswehr*. Overcoming these problems sparked considerable debate within the military. Strohn reconstructs the various schools of thought concerning Germany's political-military dilemma, demonstrating that although the offensive doctrine promoted by Hans von Seeckt, known as combined-arms warfare, would become the contemporary orthodoxy, there were alternative views that placed far more emphasis on defensive warfare and civilian cooperation.

Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen (F.u.G.), or Leadership and Battle with Combined Arms, released by Hans von Seeckt in two parts in September 1921 and October 1923, formed the basis for German doctrine for the majority of the Republican era. Written with a much larger force in mind than the diminished *Reichswehr*, *F.u.G.* focused on the creation of an approximately 250,000 man army, well-trained, highly professional and capable of fighting in an "all-arms" style with tanks, aircraft and mechanized infantry to achieve operational level breakthroughs. However the manual would only be applicable to the *Reichswehr* if Germany regained its military sovereignty. Strohn states that *F.u.G.* saw little value in prepared defensive warfare, instead focusing on mobility and speed as the keys to victory, and did not accurately reflect the realities of life for the German army under the terms of the Treaty of

Versailles. The French occupation of the Ruhr region in 1923 forced a reprisal of army doctrine, strengthening the position of leading officers who desired to form plans that reflected Germany's reduced military and political stature. Strohn focuses on Joachim von Stülpnagel as the focal point of critique of Seeckt's ideas, and leader of the so-called 'Fronde' within the German army. In contrast to Seeckt's small, highly professional *neuzeitliches Heer*, Stülpnagel was an advocate of the mass-based conscription *Volkskrieg*, or People's War, alternative. By elaborating on Stülpnagel's theories, as well as the proposals from other defensive minded officers like Walther Reinhardt, Strohn carefully defends his over-riding argument that doctrine on defensive warfare continually existed along side offensive theories within the German army, and more specifically in the interwar period when the *Reichswehr* was supposedly dominated solely by notions of combined-arms tactics, or 'Blitzkrieg.' For the author, the occupation of the Ruhr comprises a watershed moment for the German army. German impotence in the face of French military power led to the understanding that neither the standing *Reichswehr* forces, Seeckt's army of the future, nor the potential troops of the Emergency Army could solve Germany's defensive issues. Although Stülpnagel's People's War ideas were met with criticism and were not fully adopted, they were a part of a wider recognition that defensive doctrine and intensified civil-military relations needed to receive higher priority within the military sphere.

Strohn does not refute the claim that *Truppenführung* served as the basis for German victories from 1939 to 1942, and was the clearest manifestation of 'Blitzkrieg' tactics, however the author convincingly argues that the manual also demonstrated a return to a more balanced approach to offensive and defensive warfare. General Ludwig Beck's treatise regarded both forms of warfare as essential and complementary methods of strategic, operational, and tactical manoeuvre. Unlike *F.u.G.*, which only discussed limited options for defensive warfare, *Truppenführung* detailed a full variety of defensive possibilities including defense-in-depth, delaying resistance, counterattack, and delaying engagement. Strohn concludes his book with a thorough overview of the army's appraisal of the aggressive foreign policy pursued by Hitler during the Third Reich in the final years before the Second World War. The army leadership did not find fault with Hitler's objectives, but did express considerable angst over the Führer's accelerated timetable, which some General Staff members believed would led to open

war before their rearmament program was completed. Even during the years of aggressive Nazi foreign policy and open rearmament of Germany's armed forces, through personal papers and internal memoranda, Strohn establishes quite clearly that considerations for defensive warfare remained a part of German military planning.

Given the intense analytical focus on the German army, both before and during the Second World War, it is perhaps surprising that a work focusing on German defensive thought took this long to be produced. Although this area of historical research has been somewhat underdeveloped until now, it does not seem that there is any hostility from the offensive warfare focused scholars towards study of German defense planning, as implied by the author. Nevertheless, Strohn's work stands as an informative, accessible analysis of German military thought, and an excellent counterpart to the numerous volumes focusing on combined-arms tactics, or 'Blitzkrieg.'

Matt Bucholtz is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Calgary, under the supervision of Dr. Holger Herwig. His dissertation research concerns the political nature and activities of the German military from 1918 to 1923.