

Chapter Title: Military Bias and Offensive Strategy

Book Title: The Ideology of the Offensive

Book Subtitle: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914

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Published by: Cornell University Press. (1984)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt32b46j.4>

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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.¹

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.²

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

rapid offensive victories, as it had against Austria in 1866 and France in 1870. Although German strategists recognized that improvements in firepower were making the attacker's task tactically more difficult, they could not accept that a future war would inevitably take the form of an inglorious, unproductive stalemate. At the same time, their professional preoccupation with potential military threats led them to overestimate the inevitability of war with France and Russia. As a result, they underrated the ability of a defensive posture to deter war and overrated the need for a capability to attack preventively. Over time, these offensive predispositions became magnified and dogmatized, as the powerful, centralized General Staff succeeded in inculcating the whole officer corps with a simple, standard offensive doctrine.

Germany's widely anticipated decision to deploy more than four-fifths of its army against France gave Russia a strong incentive to attack the German rear. In the Russian case, the error lay not in the decision to attack but in the decision to attack too soon with too weak a force. The hasty, undermanned advance into East Prussia led to the encirclement and destruction of a Russian force of 100,000 men at Tannenberg. This strategic disaster can be explained partly by intra-military politics and partly by the Russians' psychological need to see the necessary as possible. The General Staff in St. Petersburg, emphasizing their strategic aim of preventing a collapse of the French army, placed the highest priority on an early attack on Germany's rear. However, local commanders in Kiev sought to divert forces for their own offensive, against Austria. The absence of a strong central authority to adjudicate this dispute resulted in a compromise that left commanders on both fronts too weak to carry out their tasks. Nonetheless, the General Staff continued to deem a hasty attack on Germany a strategic necessity. Choosing to see the necessary as possible, they discounted captured German war games that foretold the spectacular German victory at Tannenberg.

In sum, strategic decision making in all three states was similar in that institutional and cognitive biases led to the adoption of unduly offensive strategies. In each case, however, the intensity and the decisive causes of offensive bias differed because of varying external and internal circumstances. Bias was greatest—and most influenced by motivational factors—in France, where grave threats to organizational interests provided an overwhelming incentive to skew strategy and doctrine. Bias was less acute in Germany and Russia, where no single motive for error was quite so compelling. There, the choice of offensive strategy resulted from the interplay of rational plausibility,

motivational biases of lesser intensity, and doctrinal oversimplifications.³

RATIONALITY AND BIAS IN STRATEGIC ANALYSIS

A rational policymaker may prefer either an offensive or a defensive strategy; the choice depends on goals and on a variety of geopolitical factors. Almost invariably, some degree of bias will influence the assessment of these factors. Generally speaking, we can divide sources of bias in decision making into two groups: the first, biases rooted in the motivations of the decision makers, especially in their parochial interests, and the second, biases that result from decision makers' attempts to simplify and impose a structure on their complex analytical tasks. Both groups of bias can be viewed as cognitive phenomena, skewing the perceptions and choices of individual decision makers; they can also be considered organizational phenomena, shaping the structure, ideology, and standard operating procedures of institutions.⁴

Sometimes decision makers prefer policies because of motives they would rather not admit, even to themselves. In such cases, the need to find an acceptable justification for the policy they prefer will skew perceptions and analysis. "Decision making" will be a process of rationalization rather than of rationality. In strategic policy making, the most pervasive source of motivational bias is the institutional interest of the military.⁵ The military tends to favor policies that promote its organizational aims. Since these favored policies must be justified in strategic terms, strategic perceptions and analysis are likely to become skewed whenever organizational interests are at odds with sound strategy.

Rationalization is also likely when the strategist has no acceptable options—that is, when any strategy would almost certainly involve an unacceptable sacrifice of some key value. In practice, decision makers in this situation tend to adopt risky strategies, but in rationalizing this choice, they also tend to overrate the probability that their strategy will succeed. In other words, people see the "necessary" as possible.

Because decision makers need to make complex analytical tasks more manageable, they inevitably use perceptual and analytical shortcuts in devising solutions to problems⁶ and thus fall victim to a second group of biases. In military analysis, the most important simplifying device is the strategic doctrine, which imposes a structure on

Military Bias and Offensive Strategy

the strategic problem and suggests possible solutions. But doctrine, in simplifying reality, introduces biases into strategic analysis.

In most cases, then, the choice between offensive and defensive strategies will be the result of some combination of rational incentives, motivational biases, and doctrinal oversimplifications. In particular circumstances, examined in detail immediately below, one or another of these determinants will dominate the decision makers' choice.

OFFENSE AND DEFENSE: A RATIONAL CALCULUS

A rational strategist's choice of an offensive or a defensive strategy should depend on national aims (i.e., foreign-policy goals), technological and geographical constraints, and the military balance. In 1914 the particular circumstances of each of the European powers produced in each case a different set of rational incentives. France's circumstances should have pointed decisively to defense. In Germany, there were some incentives for offense but probably stronger reasons to remain on the defensive. In the Russian case, Germany's decision to deploy only weak forces in the East virtually forced Russia to mount some kind of attack, but a less hasty offensive would have fared better than the plan that was actually adopted.

National Aims

A state particularly needs an offensive strategy when it seeks to conquer or coerce others. France, Germany, and Russia each had some interest in revising the political status quo in Europe, but in no case did this interest outweigh security as the primary determinant of military strategy.

Historians sometimes assume that the French offensive strategy was dictated by an offensive political aim—regaining the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, lost to Germany in 1870.⁷ The French General Staff certainly did hope that victory in a general European war would “enable the map of Europe to be redrawn,” but this hope did not determine the shape of their war plan.⁸ Even proponents of a “defensive-offensive” or “counteroffensive” strategy wanted to recapture Alsace-Lorraine, but they argued that this could be done only by capitalizing on the strategic error that Germany would make in attacking France.⁹ Meanwhile, proponents of offense did not dispute that operational necessities, not the revanchist urge, should shape

French strategy; they simply had a different view of those necessities.¹⁰

Germany was also inclined to revise the political status quo in Europe. Although the desire to annex European territory was not particularly strong until the war had already begun, Germany had other, more diffuse revisionist aims that an offensive capability on land in Europe might have served. Germany's "reach for world power," a vague striving for politico-economic influence in a variety of semicolonial enterprises, was hampered by the irremediable inferiority of its fleet relative to Britain's. Consequently, Germany needed an offensive, war-winning capability on the continent to neutralize the political consequences of the naval imbalance. Arguably, the ability to overturn the continental balance would allow Germany to get its way in colonial and sphere-of-influence disputes, not only with France and Russia but also with Britain.¹¹

This thesis sounds so logical that it deserves to be true. In fact, however, the General Staff officers who shaped the strategy of the German army were neither so systematic nor so single-minded in the pursuit of German *Weltpolitik*. Each of the three chiefs of staff who worked out Germany's offensive war plans from 1870 to 1914 was primarily preoccupied by the need to secure German survival in a two-front war. As a General Staff memorandum of 1902 put it: "We are not out for conquest, but seek merely to defend what is ours. We shall probably never be the aggressor, always the attacked. The swift successes we shall need, however, can be achieved with certainty only when we take the offensive."¹² Even junior General Staff officers, some of whom were avowedly expansionist, were primarily concerned with the threat to German security posed by the encircling Entente. In their view, offense was the best defense. Conveniently, they saw no conflict between a strategy designed for security and a strategy designed for expansion.

Among Russian war planners, those who argued for an offensive against Germany proceeded strictly from considerations of Russian security. Those who argued for an offensive against Austria, however, cited not only military operational reasons but also a political aim, that of clearing the way for Russian hegemony in the Balkans and the Turkish Straits. In this sense, the overcommitted, offensive nature of the plan ultimately adopted, which provided insufficient forces for both offensives, can be partially attributed to the lure of conquest.

Technology and Geography

In strictly operational terms, both attacking and defending confer some advantages and some disadvantages. The attacker's charac-

teristic advantages derive from surprise and the initiative, the defender's from terrain barriers, fortifications, shorter supply lines, and better mobility. The relative weight of these advantages and disadvantages depends on the specific technological and geographical circumstances in which the campaign is to take place. In 1914 technology and geography would combine to reinforce the defender's characteristic advantages and to lessen those of the attacker. These facts were foreshadowed by every war fought between 1860 and 1914, but they were only partially appreciated by European military strategists of the era.

In matters of tactics, the Boer and Russo-Japanese wars drove home the fact that improvements in firepower were making assaults on prepared positions extremely costly. German doctrine had long appreciated the difficulty of frontal attacks and emphasized flank maneuvers to avoid them. To some degree, the French also understood this problem, but they overrated the ability of *élan* and marginal tactical innovations to overcome it. The Russians also looked on the advantages of the defense as a problem to be overcome, not as an opportunity to be exploited.

In matters of strategic maneuver and logistics, the technologies of 1914 also gave the defender an inherent advantage. Although the railroads allowed the attacker to concentrate a large force on the frontier very quickly, the mobilization and transport of a significant force still took at least a few days and could hardly be kept secret. As long as the defender countermobilized quickly, maintained a reasonable covering force on the frontier, and concentrated forces in a safe area, a disarming first strike in the style of Pearl Harbor could not succeed in 1914. The attacker might still achieve surprise in the location of the attack, but prevailing technologies made it difficult to exploit the advantage that surprise conferred. For example, in August 1914 the French high command consistently misread evidence indicating that a large force was outflanking the French army by way of northern Belgium. The French persisted in this error for more than three weeks after mobilization, when they finally decided to shift their forces by rail to meet the threat to their left flank. These rail redeployments easily recaptured the initiative from the exhausted, ill-supplied Germans, who had had to "maneuver" on foot once they crossed the frontier into Belgium.

The defensive nature of the railroads was demonstrated not only in France but on every front in August 1914. Most spectacularly, the German defenders of East Prussia used the railroads to shuttle between the two wings of a Russian pincer maneuver, easily achieving local superiority despite their inferiority in the theater as a whole.

The Ideology of the Offensive

Even the Russians, defending against an Austrian thrust into Poland, used a rapid redeployment by rail to plug a huge gap that opened up in their front line. In every case, the railroads allowed the defender to outmaneuver the footbound attacker and to recapture the initiative.

In addition to this advantage in transportation, defenders were also able to exploit advantages conferred by water barriers, permanent fortifications, and relatively short supply lines. Even the sheer magnitude of the forces engaged provided a huge advantage to the defender, particularly on the western front. Once a certain density of forces is achieved, defenders can succeed even if they are substantially outnumbered. Adding attackers to a narrow front produces diminishing returns, not victory.¹³ The violation of Belgian neutrality more than doubled the length of the western front, however, and reduced this defensive advantage.

War planners did not ignore these operational and logistical advantages of the defender, but they did underrate them. As a result, planners were unduly optimistic about the chances of their own offensive plans and unduly pessimistic about the prospects of defensive alternatives.

The Military Balance

As a rule, the weaker power is usually the defender and the stronger is the attacker. This rule tacitly recognizes the advantages of the defense, and even the European powers followed it before 1914. France adopted a strictly defensive strategy during its period of weakness in the 1870s, and Russia did the same after being weakened by the Russo-Japanese War. When the balance of forces was more equal, however, strategists tended to forget the advantages of the defense.

The anticipated trend of the balance can also influence the choice between offense and defense. In Germany and Russia, for example, strategy was strongly influenced by the anticipation of momentary advantages that could be exploited only by offensive means. These included "windows of opportunity" that would open—and, if not exploited, close—during the anticipated course of the war as well as permanently adverse trends in the military balance that gave an incentive for preventive war.

German strategists believed that Russia's slow mobilization would give them a window of opportunity during the initial weeks of the war. If they did not achieve a decisive early victory over France, they believed, Russian numerical superiority and a British blockade would eventually turn the tide against them. As it turned out, Germany was

better equipped than Russia to endure a long war, despite the British blockade. Nonetheless, Germany gambled on its fleeting chance for a rapid decision against France and, as a result, opened a window of opportunity for Russia. Correctly anticipating the Germans' decision to deploy only a weak force on the eastern front, the Russians felt themselves doubly compelled to advance very rapidly against Germany. First, the Russian General Staff, fearing that France would succumb without immediate assistance, felt compelled to close the Germans' window of opportunity in the west. Second, the Russians wanted to exploit their own window against Germany by advancing to a stronger, shorter defense line along the River Vistula, which would be easier to hold after the Germans turned their attention to the east. Both the Russians and the Germans were pessimistic about their chances against the others in a long war; consequently, both adopted risky offensives in order to end the war quickly or to improve their prospects in a longer war.

Another reason for the Germans' preference for offense was the preventive strain in their strategic thinking. Ever since 1870, German strategists had been anticipating the day when a revived France and a growing Russia would threaten to outstrip the combined military capability of Germany and Austria. When that time came, as the General Staff argued it had in 1887, an offensive capability would be needed to launch preventive war against one or both potential enemies. On that occasion, the civilian leadership substituted an arms buildup for a preventive war. In the period after 1912, however, the Germans doubted their ability to keep abreast of planned increases in the Russian army. They saw a closing window of opportunity for a preventive war and, not accidentally, had an offensive war plan to carry it out.

At least some of these windows of opportunity really existed, but strategists consistently overrated their importance relative to factors favoring the defense. Because of the defender's great tactical and logistical advantages, it was unrealistic to believe that France could be defeated during the brief opportunity created by Russia's slow mobilization. Even though the French played into the Germans' hands by attacking, their residual defensive capability was still sufficient to prevent a final decision and to reverse the tide. For the same reasons, anticipated improvements in Russian capabilities would not have outstripped Germany and Austria's ability to fight a defensive war successfully. The Russian build-up did threaten the viability of Germany's offensive plan, but only because it was so tenuous in the first place.

Thus a rational calculus can yield an offensive strategy when some or all of the following conditions hold: (1) the state is expansionist, (2) technology either favors the attacker or at least does not strongly favor the defender, (3) geography does not strongly favor the defender, (4) the military balance is favorable, and (5) the anticipated trend of the balance is unfavorable. But in 1914 technology strongly favored the defender, a fact that alone should have outweighed all the countervailing incentives for offense. Consequently, strictly rational calculations cannot explain the strategies that were adopted.

OFFENSIVE BIAS: MOTIVATIONS AND INTERESTS

Policies are sometimes shaped by motives that conflict with the dictates of sound strategy. When such conflict occurs, perceptions and analysis will be skewed so that the decision can be justified as an apparently rational public-policy choice. In strategic policy making before World War I, we can identify two types of such motivated biases: biases caused by the institutional interests of the military, and biases caused by the need to see the necessary as possible.

Institutional Interests

The institutional interests of the military had a pervasive influence on strategic policy, analysis, and perceptions in the period before World War I. In each of the continental powers, parochial interests played some role in biasing strategy in favor of the offense. Some of these parochial biases are of a kind that should always lead any military organization to prefer offense; others favored offense in 1914 but under different conditions might favor defense. Germany offers examples of the former variety, France of the latter.¹⁴

Offense is difficult and demands large defense budgets. It is also productive—productive in that decisive offensive campaigns produce demonstrable returns on the state's investment in military capability. In the 1880s, for example, Field Marshal Colmar von der Goltz pushed the view that "modern wars have become the nation's way of doing business"—a perspective that made sense only if wars were short, cheap, and hence offensive.¹⁵

Another dividend of offense is the increased prestige and heightened self-image of the army. The quick, decisive Wars of German Unification turned the Prussian officer corps into demigods, whom the rest of the nation honored and emulated. Offense looks even better to the military when it considers the alternatives. As Barry Posen puts it,

Military Bias and Offensive Strategy

offense makes soldiers specialists in victory, defense makes them specialists in attrition, and deterrence makes them specialists in slaughter.¹⁶

The elder Helmuth von Moltke succinctly stated the universal wish of military commanders: "The politician should fall silent the moment that mobilization begins."¹⁷ This silence is least likely to happen during limited or defensive wars, where the whole point of fighting is to negotiate a diplomatic solution. Then, political considerations—and hence politicians—have to figure in operational decisions. The military is most likely to be allowed operational autonomy when the operational goal is to disarm the adversary quickly and decisively by offensive means. For this reason, the military will seek to force doctrine and planning into this mold.¹⁸

These motives for offensive bias operate in a wide variety of historical and social settings. More idiosyncratic were the institutional interests that biased the French in favor of the offensive in the years before 1914. Briefly, the military touted the offensive because traditional French military institutions could claim an offensive capability where militia-type institutions could not. In other circumstances, however, these incentives might be reversed. If traditional institutions were best suited for defense and a competing institutional scheme was best suited for offense, the military would be likely to denigrate the offense in order to preserve its "organizational essence."¹⁹ In the 1930s, for example, the preservation of the organizational status quo worked against the offensive doctrine and force postures urged by Charles de Gaulle in France and Heinz Guderian in Germany.²⁰

In addition to specifying whether an institutional interest favors offense or defense, the analyst should also specify the strength of the resulting motivation. The general rule is that the motivation for bias will be greatest when three conditions prevail: first, institutional interests are under a severe, immediate threat; second, the interests at stake are fundamental ones, especially self-image and organizational essence;²¹ finally, there must be some contradiction between institutional interests and sound strategy. By definition, there is no bias if accurate perceptions and analysis happen to be perfectly compatible with institutional interests.

Decisional Conflict

Conflicts between institutional and strategic interests are not the only source of motivated bias. Psychologists have long speculated

that bias may also be caused by other types of "decisional conflicts." These types might include a conflict between the decision maker's preconceptions and evidence showing that they are incorrect, a conflict between the decision maker's aims and evidence showing that they are unattainable, or a trade-off between any two values that the decision maker holds. Some psychologists argue that all of these types of conflicts produce stress, which the decision maker may try to eliminate by denying the existence of the conflict. They hold that the denial is accomplished through some bias in perception or analysis,²² a hypothesis that helps to explain some of the strategic errors of 1914.

Decisional stress is most painful when circumstances seem to offer no chance of achieving an acceptable outcome. This was the situation facing General Iurii Danilov, the chief operational planner in the Russian General Staff in 1914. Danilov was very skeptical of France's chances against Germany in the opening phase of the war and even more pessimistic about Russia's prospects in a long war against Germany. This evaluation led him to place a high priority on an immediate Russian offensive into East Prussia in order to relieve the pressure on the French. Bureaucratic politics prevented Danilov from allocating sufficient forces to do the job safely and successfully. Rather than abandon or delay his offensive, however, Danilov eliminated his "decisional conflict" by underrating the operational difficulties of the advance into East Prussia. Believing that the hasty attack was necessary, he chose to see it as possible. This inclination to see the necessary as possible favored the offense in the Russian case, but in other circumstances, it might favor the defense. For example, the commander of a besieged garrison will tend to underrate the offensive capabilities of the opponent if he feels that surrender would be unthinkable.

In summary, some sources of motivated bias should always favor the offense, but others may favor either offense or defense, depending on the circumstances. The strength of the motivation for bias depends on the intensity of the threat to the decision maker's interests, the importance of the interests at stake, and where institutional interests are involved, the degree to which they conflict with sound strategy.

OFFENSIVE BIAS: THE NEED TO SIMPLIFY

Questions of military strategy, like most public-policy problems, entail considerable complexity and uncertainty. Most of the elements

of the problem are known in only an approximate way. How strong are the opposing sides? What will the opponent do with his forces? How will new, relatively untested technologies affect the conditions of combat? What will be the likely consequences of various alternative courses of action? Large amounts of information bearing on these questions may be available, but much of it may be contradictory or ambiguous.

To make the complex task of war planning more manageable, the military strategist needs to develop relatively simple but effective techniques for scanning and organizing information about the problem, and for structuring and evaluating the available options. It is primarily military doctrine, a set of beliefs about the nature of war and the keys to success on the battlefield, that performs this function for the military planner. These beliefs provide a framework for organizing information and criteria for evaluating its importance. They also provide a curriculum for the training of new soldiers, a guide for the design of organizational structures, and a criterion for the establishment of standard operating procedures. Thus, doctrine helps to provide a simple, coherent, standardized structure both for strategic thought and for military institutions.

The cognitive and organizational need for simplicity and stable structure also shapes the evolution of doctrinal beliefs. Core assumptions are formed by early experiences or training. These are difficult to change, despite disconfirming evidence or incentives to adopt new beliefs. Discrepant information is either ignored or incorporated into the belief system in a way that minimizes the need to change the system's structure.²³ Vivid, firsthand experiences, personal successes and failures, and events important to the person's state or organization play a disproportionate role in the subsequent learning process.²⁴ In this way, military doctrines—like any belief system—reflect the need for continuity, ease of recall, and a restricted scope of attention to information.

As the strategist's belief system simplifies and structures the strategic problem, it inevitably introduces elements of bias into perceptions and choices. If new problems do not fit into the categories that the old beliefs establish, they will not be well understood. Those aspects of the problem which lie outside the strategist's inevitably limited scope of attention will be ignored. Beliefs formed on the basis of early training or parochial experiences, however, may not continue to be an appropriate guide for defining the problem.

The case studies of strategic planning before 1914 suggest five sources of bias that involve some form of doctrinal simplification.

Some of these biases always favor the offense; some favor either offense or defense, depending on specific circumstances; others act to intensify whatever biases may already exist.

1. *Focus of attention.* The professional training and duties of soldiers force them to focus on threats to the state's security and on the conflictual side of international relations. Necessarily preoccupied with the prospect of armed conflict, they see war as a pervasive aspect of international life. In their focus on the role of the military in ensuring national security, they forget that other means can also be used toward the same end. For these reasons, the military professional tends to hold a simplified, zero-sum view of international politics and the nature of war. In this kind of Hobbesian world, wars are seen as difficult to avoid and almost impossible to keep limited.

When the hostility of others is taken for granted, prudential calculations are slanted in favor of preventive wars and preemptive strikes. Indeed, as German military officers were fond of arguing, the proper role of diplomacy in a Hobbesian world is to create favorable conditions for launching preventive war. A preventive grand strategy requires an offensive operational doctrine. Defensive plans and doctrines will be considered only after all conceivable offensive schemes have been decisively discredited. Under conditions of uncertainty, such discrediting will of course be difficult, so offensive plans and doctrines will frequently be adopted even if offense is in the operational sense no easier than defense.

The assumption of extreme hostility also favors the notion that decisive, offensive operations are always needed to end wars. If the conflict of interest between the parties is seen as limited, then a decisive victory may not be needed to end the fighting on mutually acceptable terms. In fact, a successful defense may suffice to deny the opponent his objectives. However, when the opponent is believed to be extremely hostile, disarming him completely may seem like the only way to induce him to break off his attacks. For this reason, offensive doctrines and plans are needed, even if defense is easier in an operational sense.

Kenneth Waltz argues that states are socialized to the implications of international anarchy. Because of their professional preoccupations, military professionals become "oversocialized." Seeing war more likely than it really is, they increase its likelihood by adopting offensive plans and buying offensive forces.²⁵ In this way, the perception that war is inevitable becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

2. *Formation of doctrine.* Either from the individual or from the organizational point of view, doctrinal beliefs are inordinately influenced

by a few formative experiences. Past wars and early training, in particular, establish patterns of thought and organization that are highly resistant to change. As technology and other factors change, however, these old patterns may not remain appropriate. In other words, they constitute a bias. Depending on the lessons imparted by these formative experiences, this bias may favor either offense or defense. From the Wars of Unification, the German army learned to appreciate the great advantages of decisive offensive strategies, even though the lesson was already dubious in 1871 and had become downright dangerous by 1914. In contrast, mainstream opinion in all the European armies drew the inference from World War I that offense had become extremely disadvantageous, a bias that led many to underrate the offensive potential of the modern tank.²⁶

3. *Dogmatization of doctrine.* All doctrines are "dogmatic" in the sense that they are simple, narrow, deductive, and resistant to changes, but some are more dogmatic than others. Among individuals, dogmatism is most likely in theoretical, sand-table strategists, who have had little direct experience in managing a war. In organizations, doctrines are likely to become dogmatic when authority is highly centralized and when environmental disruptions, like wars or domestic political changes, are absent. Under these conditions, central military authorities can succeed in inculcating a simple, standard doctrine via war college training, field manuals, institutional structures, and war plans. This process of disseminating a doctrine throughout the organization tends to make a simple doctrine even simpler, because it must be made easily communicable. As a result, dogmatization and standardization make existing biases more extreme, whether they are offensive or defensive.

4. *Economy of calculation.* One of the functions of doctrine is to provide rules of thumb for simplifying complex operational calculations. Logistical calculations can be particularly onerous. In the pre-war Russian and German armies, war planning at the highest levels proceeded on the basis of extremely casual assumptions about logistical feasibility. Lower-level logistical planners, responsible for working out the details, were supposed to implement strategy, not evaluate it. In principle, logistical rules of thumb might be optimistic and thus favor the offense, or they might be pessimistic and thus favor the defense. In the Russian and German cases, however, the rule of thumb employed was a friction-free, best-case estimate of marching and supply capabilities.²⁷

5. *Reduction of uncertainty.* Posen points out that "taking the offensive, exercising the initiative, is a way of structuring the battle."²⁸

Defense, in contrast, is more reactive, less structured, and harder to plan. People in charge of large organizations seek structure—or the illusion of structure. Hence, as Stephen Van Evera deduces, the military will prefer the task that is easier to plan even if it is more difficult to execute successfully. The Russian case provides direct support for this view. Between 1910 and 1912 regional staffs explicitly complained that the General Staff's defensive war plan left their planning problem too unstructured.

In sum, doctrinal simplification invariably introduces some degree of bias into strategic analysis. Some military biases, like the overestimation of the likelihood of war, tend to favor the offense. Other biases, like the inordinate influence of formative experiences, may favor either offense or defense, depending on the specific circumstances. Still other biases, like the organizational need to simplify and standardize doctrine, reinforce whatever bias already exists.

THE SYNTHESIS: ORGANIZATIONAL IDEOLOGY

The selection of an offensive or defensive strategy is determined by the interaction of rational calculation, motivational biases, especially those due to institutional interests, and the cognitive and organizational need for doctrinal simplification. The outcome of the decision-making process will reflect both the content of each of these three determinants and their relative strength.

If all three factors point toward the same strategy, the outcome is clear. If they imply different strategies, however, the outcome will depend on their comparative weights. Rational calculation will weigh most heavily when the supporting evidence is clear and decisive; it will carry less weight when environmental incentives and constraints are ambiguous. Motivated bias will be greatest when central values, especially key parochial interests, are severely threatened. Doctrinal simplification will be greatest when institutions are strong and centralized, when environmental disruptions are absent for a long time, and when the top strategist is what John Steinbruner calls a "theoretical thinker." When one of these determinants is stronger than the other two, it will dominate the choice between an offensive and a defensive strategy. When each of the three carries significant weight, strategy will be a synthesis of rational, motivational, and doctrinal considerations.

In both the French and the German cases, this synthesis was accomplished by means of an organizational ideology, which included

beliefs about the nature of war, prescriptions for healthy military institutions, and doctrines for military operations. In essence, the ideology represented a consensus of views on abstract principles, which had practical implications. Eventually, the ideology became institutionalized in field regulations, organizational structures, war plans, and war college curricula.

Organizational ideologies differ in the way they synthesize the rational, motivational, and doctrinal determinants of strategy, according to the differing strength of each of the determinants. Five patterns are noteworthy in the decades before 1914.²⁹

In France between 1880 and 1898, the military developed a relatively flexible, undogmatic ideology, centered on a moderately offensive doctrine. It helped to neutralize a moderate threat to traditional institutional arrangements. Although the ideology was unambiguous in its defense of these tenets in the abstract, pragmatism reigned in applying them to the concrete problems of war planning and, to some extent, those of institutional reform.

Later in the same country, between 1905 and the outbreak of war, a more extreme version of the organizational ideology emerged. In the aftermath of the Dreyfus affair and the resulting attacks on traditional military institutions, the French military's organizational ideology evolved in the direction of caricature, with an extreme emphasis on the offensive. Threats to core values and the increasing intrusion of parochial interests into military policy making led to perceptual biases, of which the misreading of German strategic intentions is the most striking example.

Germany between 1870 and 1890 illustrates ideology as a more rational guide to action. The doctrine of the rapid decision by a battle of encirclement simplified planning and satisfied the requirements of organizational self interest, but these functions were not allowed to jeopardize the primary role of doctrine as a guide to success on the battlefield. Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke strove to create a doctrine that was consistent both with the realities of modern warfare and with his preference for rapid, decisive victories. Whenever these two sets of concerns came clearly into conflict, however, Moltke sacrificed some of his preferences in order to maintain the feasibility of his plans and doctrine.

From 1890 to the start of war, the German organizational ideology evolved into an institutionalized dogma. Moltke's successors did not retain the same balance among the three determinants of the organizational ideology. Alfred von Schlieffen, a narrower and more theoretical thinker than Moltke, bowed to cognitive and institutional

The Ideology of the Offensive

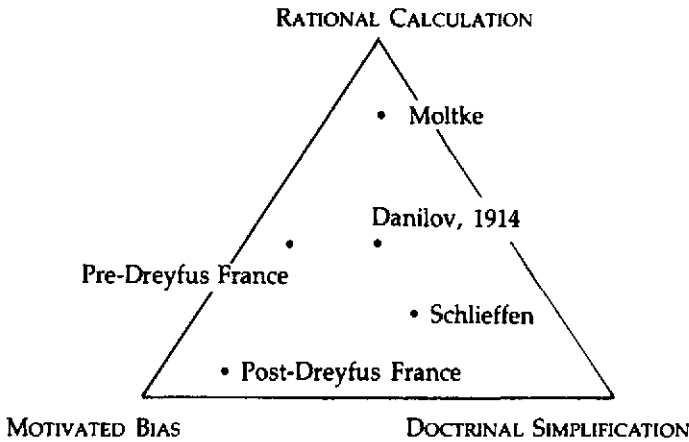


Figure 1. Strategic choice: Balance of determinants.

incentives to dogmatize Moltke's doctrine and used a double standard in evaluating alternative views.

Finally, prewar Russia exemplifies the absence of unified organizational ideology. The development of a unified organizational ideology was prevented by the comparative decentralization of Russian military institutions and by the doctrinal and organizational upheavals that followed the Russo-Japanese War. As a result, the synthesis of rationality, motivated bias, and doctrinal simplification was more ad hoc and less stable than in France and Germany. In August 1914 Danilov's improvised strategy reflected a mixture of analytical realism, motivated optimism, and pessimistic preconceptions. The lack of a structured ideology more hindered than helped effective performance in war. Military organizations that lack a unified doctrine, like the Russian army in 1914, tend to find that the advantages of "keeping an open mind" do not compensate for the lack of a coherent theory of victory.

Intramilitary Politics

Up to this point, I have portrayed strategic planning as a unitary process, not a pluralistic one. In a unitary decision process, plans and doctrines are derived either from the values and perceptions of an individual decision maker or from the shared perspectives of a like-minded group. In the German case, the organizational ideology was sufficiently institutionalized that one can treat German planning in unitary terms. In the French case, however, competing viewpoints vied for influence over strategic planning doctrine. The French war

plan in 1914 resulted from the victory of one of these outlooks within the military. This victory allowed General Joseph Joffre, the French chief of staff, to lay down strategic policy according to the predispositions and interests of the people sharing this common view. In this sense, the French plan can also be discussed as the product of a unitary process of decision making.

In the Russian case, however, strategic policy was the product of a pluralistic decision process. No single viewpoint or group within the Russian military could dominate the planning of war. The Russians lacked both a unified, undisputed doctrine and a centralized, universally recognized authority for adjudicating strategic disputes. Under

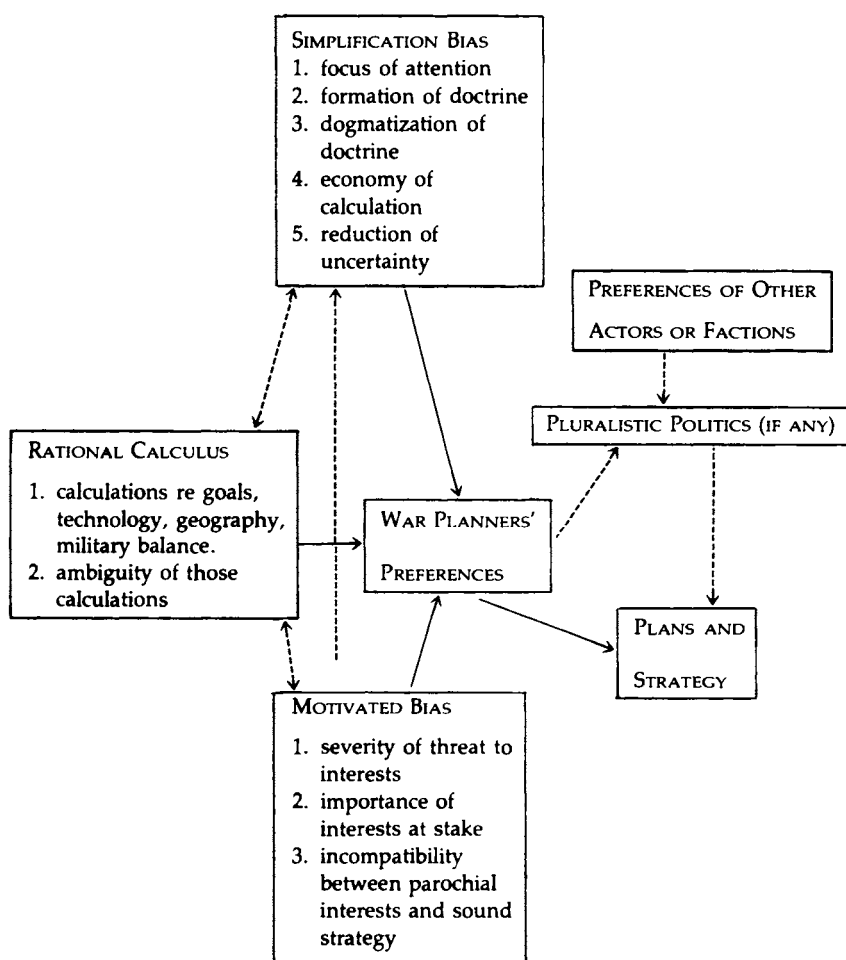


Figure 2. Determinants of strategy.

these circumstances, war plans reflected a political compromise between alternative strategic conceptions. Under the terms of the de facto compromise, the General Staff were allowed their offensive against Germany and the dissenters in the military districts were allowed their offensive against Austria. Pursuing these two offensives diminished the forces available for each one. Consequently, the compromise plan was more overcommitted and more offensive than the initial preference of either faction.³⁰

In this sense, the Russian offensives result from the workings of pluralistic politics rather than the interests, predispositions, or simplifications of any particular group. Still, there remains the question of how a plan entailing a dangerous overcommitment of forces could have been seen as an acceptable compromise, and to answer it, biases in the unitary perspectives of the competing groups must be considered.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

In the case studies, I test, by the method of controlled comparison, causal hypotheses about how strategies were made.³¹ Three different kinds of comparison are used: different time periods in the same country, different factions in the same country at the same time, and different countries.

To facilitate comparison, the following sequence of questions will be asked of each of the three cases:

What were the strategic problems and objectives of the planners in each country?

What was the war plan that they devised?

Why did it fail to achieve their objectives?

To what extent was its failure anticipated?

Should the difficulties have been foreseen?

Were there more promising alternatives?

Why were these alternatives rejected or ignored?

Was the evaluation of alternatives biased?

What was the cause of this bias?

The first chapter on each case is organized according to these questions. The longer second chapter, which presents more detailed evidence in support of the argument, is organized chronologically.

The use of these different sorts of comparisons has two purposes. The first is to show that variations in the purported cause (or independent variable) do in fact correlate with variations in the hypothesized outcome (or dependent variable). The second is to establish that these outcomes were caused by the independent variable and not by some third factor.

Military Bias and Offensive Strategy

Making comparisons between offensive and defensive periods within the same country allows us to hold many variables (e.g., geography, culture) constant. This method eliminates a number of potentially competing causes and identifies those independent variables which changed when the strategy changed. In the French case, for example, increases in offensive thinking corresponded with increases in threats to traditional military institutions, while strategic factors remained relatively constant.

A second useful technique is to compare the views of offensive and defensive factions within a country at a particular time. In this technique, therefore, strategic variables are held perfectly constant. In the French case, for example, factional views on strategy and intelligence correlate with views on institutional reforms. That the institutional viewpoints came first helps to establish institutional preferences as a determinant of strategic preferences and perceptions of threat.

The comparison of two countries occasionally proves useful, but it provides a generally inferior method of testing causal relationships, because so many variables are left uncontrolled. At least in the cases examined in this book, national circumstances differed in so many ways that controlled comparison was extremely difficult.

Methodologists tend to denigrate single-case studies, because they allegedly provide no controls on the operation of the variables. This claim is false. Given the difficulty of finding two cases that are similar in all respects except the variable to be tested, comparisons within cases are likely to be better controlled than comparisons between cases.³² Additional cases are useful for illustrating additional ways in which variables can be combined, but they are not indispensable for implementing the method of controlled comparison.

Operational Definitions

Were perceptual and analytical errors produced by systematic bias or were they a random result of the inherent difficulty of decision making under uncertainty? Five criteria help us to decide the answer. Three focus on the quality of the decision makers' perceptions and choices.³³ The first is logical consistency. Did the use of evidence and arguments adhere to normal standards of logic and consistency, or were they systematically manipulated to favor a particular set of perceptions and policies? Were offensive and defensive plans judged according to different standards? The second concerns the thoroughness of analysis. Was important information ignored? Were important costs and risks of the preferred strategy overlooked? The third involves the accuracy of perceptions. Did the preferred strategy

rely on an inaccurate perception of reality for its justification? Given the information available to the planners, do historians feel that their views were less plausible than alternative interpretations? Did informed contemporary observers share their views?³⁴

Two other criteria focus on circumstantial evidence about the reasons for perceptual and analytical errors. First, did inaccuracies, inconsistencies, or omissions tend to support the rationalization of policies promoting institutional interests? Second, were omissions or inaccuracies the result of the rigid application of narrow, inappropriate preconceptions, or were they the result of the inherent ambiguity of the evidence? Generally speaking, systematic bias can be assumed if erroneous perceptions or choices can be explained in terms of institutional interests or preconceptions and if errors consistently favor one strategy over others. In contrast, a decisionmaker's errors can be considered random if they fail to correlate with institutional interests and preconceptions and if some of them tend to support one strategy while others support its reverse.

Practical criteria are also needed to identify and measure the factors that explain the direction and degree of bias. Explanations using such terms as "degree of ambiguity," "strength of interest," and "degree of threat" can all too easily degenerate into tautology unless those factors can be measured independently of the outcomes they purport to explain. Each term presents its own difficulties.

1. *Ambiguity and plausibility.* If there is no ambiguity, only one view is plausible. Ambiguous circumstances are those which permit a broad range of plausible interpretations. Therefore, the greater the ambiguity, the greater the likelihood becomes that erroneous, biased perceptions will be sufficiently plausible to gain acceptance. To determine the degree of ambiguity in a given set of historical circumstances, there is no substitute for close historical analysis. Given the information available to the decision maker, how broad a range of plausible interpretations was consistent with the evidence? How varied were the views of informed, neutral observers?

Nonetheless, scholars do not have to depend entirely on ad hoc historical assessments. It is possible to identify a few kinds of circumstances that tend a priori to entail either a high or a low degree of ambiguity. For example, abstract issues are likely to allow greater freedom for erroneous interpretations than are concrete issues. The truth of this proposition accounts for the two-tiered nature of the lessons drawn from the Russo-Japanese War: concrete lessons about weaponry and tactics were learned fairly accurately, but lessons at the more abstract level were not.

Recent or firsthand evidence tends to be less ambiguous than faded recollections or secondhand evidence. The lessons of 1870, for example, were most clearly understood in the immediate aftermath of the war and became increasingly distorted as time passed. Similarly, those Russian officers who participated in the Russo-Japanese War were much more likely to understand the effects of firepower on the modern battlefield. Ian Hamilton, the British observer in Manchuria, suggests that the revelations of primary experience may fade rapidly, however, when interests are involved: "On the actual day of battle naked truths may be picked up for the asking; by the following morning they have already begun to get into their uniforms."³⁵

Most obviously, ambiguity is great when the decision maker lacks important information. As regards military doctrine, ambiguity will be high when the rate of technological change is high and the amount of recent combat experience is small.

2. *The importance of values and interests.* The strength of the motivation to adopt a biased assessment of strategic options is determined in part by the importance of the values and interests that an unbiased assessment would jeopardize. However, there is a danger of calling "central" any value that seems to be causing a misperception.³⁶ It is necessary, therefore, to devise a practical way of determining which values are the more important.

One solution to the problem is to list in rank order the kinds of values that are typically found to be most important to decision makers—that is, the values that they are most reluctant to sacrifice in trade-off situations.³⁷ It is frequently said that the decision maker's self-image or sense of identity is the crucial core value. The French and German cases suggest that the observation is probably correct, but this insight serves only to shift the search from typical core values to typical elements of the self-image. In the French case, the most salient elements of self-image were the habits and traditional ideals expressed in the daily life of the professional army's primary social unit, the regiment. In the German case, the most salient elements were quite different: the prestige and self-justification of the military profession as expressed in the doctrine of short, victorious, historically beneficial wars. The factors potentially contributing to the decision maker's self-image can, it appears, be disparate and numerous. An a priori listing would be at best difficult and perhaps not particularly useful.

A second way to determine which of a decision maker's values and beliefs are most important is to apply a direct measurement. For this purpose, the most central values and beliefs are those whose change

would imply the greatest change in other values and beliefs. Using this criterion, practitioners of "cognitive mapping" have developed formal procedures for determining which of a decision maker's causal beliefs are most important.³⁸ To the extent that using this method, different coders produce the same results, it might be adapted to determine the centrality of values as well as beliefs. In practical terms, however, the best proof of centrality is likely to be a conventional historical argument. In the German example, such a case could be made for the centrality of the concept of war as an inevitable and necessary engine of progress. This keystone held together the prestige, self-concept, and operational doctrine of the German military. In the French case, the most important role was played by the concept of the soldier's career as a special calling, requiring a special code of honor and a quasi-monastic separation from civil society. This concept was not only embodied in regimental life but it was also perversely reflected in operational doctrines and intelligence estimates. Significantly, soldiers who did not believe in the concept of a separate military caste were also less likely to value or believe in the rest of the organizational ideology. That is, change in the central value or belief implied a change in all the rest. In these and other cases, the only guarantee that the concept of centrality has not been employed in a circular or arbitrary way is the degree to which the historical argument is convincing.

3. *The degree of threat.* The greater the severity of threats to important institutional values and interests, the greater the motivation becomes for a biased strategic assessment. This explanatory criterion is particularly significant to the French case. Fortunately, increases in the severity of the threat to traditional French military institutions were relatively unambiguous. They are reliably corroborated both by contemporary commentators and by subsequent historical accounts.

4. *Dogmatism.* The criteria for measuring "dogmatism," as applied to Schlieffen, for example, are a resistance to changing central beliefs in the face of disconfirming evidence; a narrowness of approach to problems; an insensitivity to the need for different solutions to fit different circumstances; and a reliance on deductions from theory rather than inferences from evidence. While I shall make no attempt to achieve precise measurement for any of these criteria, they are nonetheless specific enough to permit rough, but reliable, characterizations of the degree of dogmatism.³⁹ In any event, they should suffice for evaluating the conventional wisdom that Schlieffen as a strategist was more dogmatic than the elder Moltke.

In addition to these various methodological difficulties, the scope of the analysis and the limitations of the available data are subject to several significant qualifications.

In all three cases, studies focus primarily on the perceptions and choices of military decision makers. This emphasis is not arbitrary. As the cases will demonstrate, civilians rarely played a direct role in military planning, although in Russia the evidence is not conclusive and in France direct interventions did occasionally occur. In all cases, civilians imposed indirect constraints on strategic planning, in the form of military budgets, conscription laws, and the general direction of foreign policy. In arguing the case for alternative strategies, I accept these constraints as givens.

A second, related qualification has to do with causes of offensive bias that were common to all three states. In the main, this book contends that the offensives of 1914 cannot be explained by a pan-European cult of the offensive, rooted in long-term transnational causes. If war had broken out as late as 1910, two of the three powers would have had relatively defensive strategies.⁴⁰ This is hardly the stuff of a deeply rooted, transnational cult of the offensive. Nonetheless, two transnational factors should be mentioned. The first might be termed "the 1870 model." The Prussian campaigns of 1866 and 1870 offered European militaries and civilians alike an attractive model of a short, successful, offensive war. Although French and Germans drew immediate tactical lessons from 1870 that stressed the strength of defensive firepower, the surface "lesson" of the war was that rapid, problem-solving offensives were not only feasible but beneficial. In contrast, the 1914–1918 model would weigh heavily on European strategists of the interwar period, even though the development of armored and motorized forces was undermining the relevance of its lessons.

Civilian attitudes toward war constitute the second transnational factor of significance to the period. Because of the prevalence of social Darwinist views throughout Europe, civilians tended to share the military's zero-sum view of international politics. Consequently, the military's plans for fast-moving, decisive, unrestrained operations fitted well with their own thinking. But civilian elites had an even stronger reason not to want to question their military's short-war thinking. European elites tended to see their capitalist socioeconomic order as a fragile edifice that could not survive the strains of a long

war of attrition. In a prolonged conflict, economic collapse and revolution would, they believed, be difficult to forestall. For social Darwinists who believed that wars could not be avoided, keeping them short and decisive was the only way to prevent permanent, radical change. As a result, and in comparison with their role in other historical periods, civilians had little inclination to meddle in the war planning of the professional military.⁴¹

Nevertheless, these transnational, background factors should not be overemphasized. Both were compatible with offensive or defensive strategies, as the historical record shows. At most, they operated as permissive causes of the offensives of 1914, failing to bar offensive inclinations that arose for other reasons.

The final qualification that needs to be made concerns the insufficiency of data in the Russian case. Although the chronology of the Russian planning process is well documented, the motivations for some of the changes in the war plan are not. The explanations presented in memoirs and published documents tend to be superficial. Soviet historiography has not been particularly incisive, and Western scholars have not had access to archival materials on military planning. Consequently, interpretations of Russian decision making cannot be definitive. Data problems in the French and German cases are much less severe. Especially compared to the kind of data that would be available for a contemporary case study of military planning, the historical evidence exhibits few lacunae. In fact, this fullness of evidence is the major advantage of using historical rather than contemporary cases to study the sources of bias in strategic policy making.

Although military technology has changed since 1914, the fundamental workings of the human mind as a problem-solving tool have not. Interests and preconceptions are still sources of bias in the making of military policy. Organizational ideologies still develop, for similar reasons and with similar effects on policy. Of course, lessons drawn from historical cases must be general enough to accommodate changes in the technological or the social setting. As long as this qualification is borne in mind, the following case studies may illuminate the sources of bias in human decision making—both in military contexts and in general.