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Matthias Strohn, *The German Army and the Defence of the Reich: Military Doctrine and the Conduct of the Defensive Battle, 1918–1939*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011. Pp. xiii, 277. ISBN 978-0-521-19199-9.

Review by Jesse Kauffman, Eastern Michigan University (jesse.kauffman@emich.edu).

The rapidly moving combined arms offensives that Germany unleashed between 1939 and 1941 stunned the world, quickly bringing much of Europe under Nazi control without the staggering material and human costs incurred in the protracted and futile battles of the Great War. Never before, it seemed, had any military force managed to combine such destructive power with such tightly controlled and disciplined mobility. It was fitting, then, that historians of war later sought the roots of this “Blitzkrieg” style of warfare. As Strohn notes (1, n. 2), Robert J. O’Neill, a future Chichele Professor of War at Oxford, even claimed in a 1965 essay that no other aspect of interwar German military history need be of interest to scholars.¹ With this book, Matthias Strohn, a faculty member at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst and a captain in the German military, joins the expanding ranks of those who disagree. In the period when German strategists were supposedly developing Blitzkrieg methods of attack, Strohn argues, they were actually focused on the conduct of defensive operations.

While Strohn has consulted various personal papers contained in German archives, he bases his claim primarily on official military studies produced during the interwar years—army manuals and training handbooks, and military periodicals like the *Militärwochenblatt*. With these sources, he painstakingly traces the elaborate lines of thought related to defensive warfare within the German military establishment. Given the period he restricts himself to, he must analyze the relationship between this thought and the actual practice of warfare by examining the German military’s staff rides, war games, and training exercises in the Weimar and early Nazi periods.

The book has four parts, arranged chronologically. Part 1 begins with a brief overview of the place of defensive battles in nineteenth-century German military thought, culminating with the disastrous neglect of defensive warfare in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Strohn then provides an excellent exploration of how the German army, after its initial assaults failed, rapidly adapted to the realities of trench warfare on the Western Front. Particularly intriguing is the way the Germans carefully studied the experiences of their front line units, which were analyzed by staff officers to develop ever-more sophisticated defensive tactics.

In the final chapter of this section, “Military planning in the aftermath of the First World War,” Strohn provides a valuable snapshot of Germany in the immediate aftermath of its shattering defeat in the Great War, as military commanders agonizingly debated whether Germany could resist unfavorable peace terms by force. He crystallizes the issues in what he sees as the key debate between Wilhelm Groener, who concluded that Germany could not possibly offer military resistance to peace terms, and Walther Reinhardt, who believed German honor demanded a desperate, last-ditch battle, come what may. This chapter perfectly sets up the remainder of the book by highlighting the blend of profound insecurity and deep bitterness in the military establishment in 1918–39 that spurred the creation of innovative military doctrines, including those related to the defense.

Part 2 deals with the years when the successor to the General Staff, the *Truppenamt*, was commanded by Hans von Seeckt, a period Strohn pointedly labels the “Years of Ignorance.” He shows how Seeckt’s experiences in the Great War, which included, atypically, many successful offensives, fed his ideas for a “modern

1. “Doctrine and Training in the German Army 1919–1939,” in Michael Howard, ed., *The Theory and Practice of War: Essays Presented to Captain B.H. Liddell Hart* (London: Cassell, 1965) 143.

army”—that is, small, elite, and highly mobile. If more manpower were needed for trench-like defensive operations, it would be drawn from a less elite militia. While Strohn’s analysis here is excellent, much of this section is a tedious, not entirely convincing argument with the historian Wilhelm Velten over how much Seeckt’s ideas about defensive warfare influenced the army’s main manual of the period, *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen* (“Leadership and Combat of Combined Arms”), or simply *F.u.G.*

Part 3, the analytical heart of the book, treats the decade between the occupation of the Ruhr and the eve of the Nazi seizure of power. The French invasion of the Ruhr in January 1923 brought home to a helpless military just how unprepared it was to defend Germany against aggression. This served to discredit Seeckt, since many army commanders felt he had squandered time dreaming about a future army instead of preparing realistic measures for the defense of the homeland. (This sense of weakness was reinforced in war games held over the next few years, in which Germany failed to defeat invading armies without recourse to wildly improbable scenarios, like military assistance from Great Britain). One of Seeckt’s most important critics, the operations officer of the General Staff, Joachim von Stülpnagel, argued that Germany must plan for a popular guerrilla uprising—a true *Volkskrieg* (“People’s War”)—against foreign invaders. This is an extraordinary point that Strohn should have made more of, especially since scholars have posited that hatred of irregular warfare supposedly underlay a uniquely brutal German military culture.²

The waning influence of Seeckt and the trauma of the Ruhr occupation had, Strohn argues, major effects on the German military, including an increased willingness to work with the civilian government. The evidence offered for this claim, however—such as a military plan to create a council of soldiers and civilians to discuss matters relating to the defense of the homeland—is rather weak. More crucial for the book’s central thesis is Strohn’s contention that the military gave more serious attention to defensive operations in the post-Ruhr period. Again his principal evidence is a military manual, the *F.u.G.’s* more famous successor, *Truppenführung* (“Unit Command”), long regarded as the handbook of Blitzkrieg. Strohn maintains that, despite its emphasis on attack, the manual’s statement that “one defends if one’s own inferiority does not leave another option, or if it seems appropriate because of other reasons” (188) shows a markedly more flexible vision of the nature and uses of the defense than that exhibited in the *F.u.G.* (188). However, despite this acknowledgement, the manual mostly ignores the prolonged defense of a position, concentrating instead on the *hinhaltendes Gefecht* or delaying engagement. As long practiced by the Reichswehr, this was a kind of mobile, flexible retreat intended to buy space and time and to conserve forces.

The book concludes with an overview of defensive war plans during the Third Reich and tells a mostly familiar story of an officer corps steeped in post-World War I insecurities, who considered Hitler’s military ambitions to be suicidal madness.

The two sections on the interwar years consistently display one of the book’s finest and most unusual qualities: a subtle but unmistakable sympathy for the people Strohn writes about. In nearly every history of Germany in the interwar period, the military elites are cast as villains, authoritarian rogues bent on destroying Germany’s fragile democracy. Strohn, however, reminds us that, like Weimar’s civilian politicians and business leaders, these men were trying to do a difficult job in extraordinarily trying circumstances—figuring out how Germany, its military reduced to a bare minimum by the terms of Versailles, could defend itself against aggressors. In a seething and still unstable Europe, this was hardly an idle concern. Sometimes Strohn is too sympathetic, glossing over the military’s support for anti-Republican paramilitary organizations and, worse, its conduct of a separate foreign policy towards Soviet Russia, with whom it secretly trained, but specialists in the political history of the Weimar Republic, who usually ignore military affairs save where they touch on the Republic’s demise, would do well to read these stimulating chapters.

Despite the problems I have noted with some key pieces of evidence, Strohn’s nuanced study adds depth to our understanding of the evolution of German military doctrine. He is right that the development of German tactics and strategy in the interwar years is often described in a too tidy, linear way, and that German military thinkers in fact also pondered problems of defense. But there are other problems here be-

2. See, e.g., John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2001).

sides a tendency to freight the sources with more analytical weight than they will support. Chapter 1 includes the following quotation from Clausewitz on defense:

What is the concept of defense? The parrying of a blow.... Pure defense, however, would be completely contrary to the idea of war, since it would mean that only one side was waging it.... But if we are really waging war, we must return the enemy's blows; and these offensive acts in a defensive war come under the heading of "defense"—in other words, our offensive takes place within our own positions or theater of operations. Thus, a defensive campaign can be fought with offensive battles, and in a defensive battle, we can employ our divisions offensively³ (20).

Exactly what Clausewitz means by defense here is murky and this reflects a larger problem with Strohn's book, which never clearly defines defense and defensive warfare. As Strohn concedes, the terms are ambiguous and have bedeviled even professional military officers. His analytical adoption of the traditional three levels of war—roughly, grand strategy, operations, and tactics—confuses clarifies things, since it allows him to combine aspects of warfare that may not belong together, such as the *hinhaltendes Gefecht* and Stülpnagel's *Volkskrieg*. Nor does he acknowledge forthrightly enough that the defensive measures he discusses were nearly always considered—as in the Clausewitz quotation—part of a larger strategy that usually married them to offensive operations. "A final decision can never be brought about by anything but the thrust into the heart of the enemy" (246), noted Gen. Friedrich von Boetticher after the Second World War. This theme was a commonplace of German thinking on defense. Even after the Ruhr occupation, it was assumed that defensive warfare would buy time for some other option to decide the outcome, whether guerrilla warfare, a counterattack by militia, or intervention by an international coalition. It is a pity that Strohn did not coordinate his observations on defense with the established scholarship on offensive warfare.

Strohn's rigid contrast of offense with defense replicates his presentation of key issues, arguments, and personalities in his book: Groener vs. Reinhardt, Stulpnägel vs. Seeckt, civilian *Volkskrieg* vs. an "army of the future." The same can be said of his claims regarding Blitzkrieg. It is time, he says, to jettison the narrow focus on the historical roots of something that was largely a myth. Nonetheless, the German offensives at the beginning of the Second World War were historically unique in their execution and remarkable success. It is proper for historians to explore their historical roots. Rather than offering a competing narrative, Strohn might have shown how the doctrines he studies were deeply intertwined with those more commonly associated with Blitzkrieg warfare. Robert Citino's lamentably unheeded call to replace "Blitzkrieg" with *Bewegungskrieg*—war of movement⁴—would go far to bring these two together. By the eve of the Second World War, the army had decided that delaying resistance should rely on aviation to support the nimble, mobile infantry as it pulled back. This sounds like nothing so much as a War of Movement temporarily shifted into reverse.

3. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. M. Howard and P. Paret (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1976) 357.

4. See, e.g., *Quest for Decisive Victory: From Stalemate to Blitzkrieg in Europe, 1899–1940* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2002) 195.