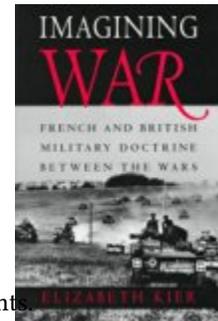


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Elizabeth Kier. *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine Between the Wars*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. x + 240 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-01191-2.

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This is not an easy book to read, an opinion which may say more about me than it does of Dr. Kier, a political scientist at the University of California, Berkeley. In keeping with her argument that “culture” is the key determinant in the choice of a nation’s military doctrine, let me suggest that “culture” of another order may also explain this reader’s uneasiness. Whereas this is a work fashioned primarily for theorists of international relations and national security, I am obliged to appraise it from an historian’s point of view. And from that perspective, the work has some limitations. This being said, it would be fair to alert readers to the multi-faceted quality of Kier’s book, and to its highly reflective nature. A thoughtful work, this is one that will certainly provoke thought; and that, we might all allow, may be worth more than a reader’s ease and sense of satisfaction.

What *Imagining War* does not do is add appreciably to the data pertaining to French and British interwar military doctrine. Having made no use of the British archives, and but limited use of the French, Kier is more intent on offering new vistas on the data already accumulated—most of it assembled by students of military history. But with a substantial collection of this secondary material at hand, she focuses her attention not so much on the conclusions formulated by the historians, as on the theoretical models designed by scholars of international relations and organizational behaviour. The interwar French and British experiences, in other words, are really means to an end: that end being further refinement of a theoretical filtration system by which social scientists study human behaviour. Lest there be any doubt on this score, one might turn to the seventh and concluding chapter wherein considerations of interwar military doctrine slowly disappear beneath the tide of interest in contemporary issues of the 1990s, and in the potential

utility of these theoretical refinements.

That much I am sure about. Hereafter, I confess to some uncertainty, much of it derived from the author’s use of language. I would not have thought, for example, that military “doctrines” could either “erase... hostilities” or “suspend... appetites” (p. 3). I do not know whether to agree or disagree with the assurance that “there are not definitive meanings attached to an objective empirical reality” (p. 3). It is not immediately obvious to me what is meant by “cultural factors that have causal autonomy” (p. 6), or by “the power of systemic imperatives,” or by a system “indeterminate of choices”, or by the “indeterminacy of functional logic” (pp. 11, 15). It is impressive vocabulary, to be sure, but it is just not very clear to someone unsteeped in the language of the inner circle. What is more, language so used does not improve with repetition—another quality which is striking in this book. Seldom have I read a work in which the builder’s nails have been hammered so often.

Having complained and confessed at one and the same time, I will do what I can to decipher the gist of the author’s argument. It begins, in the introduction and the subsequent two chapters, with an extended critique of Barry R. Posen’s *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, 1984) and Jack Snyder’s *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, 1984). In particular, Kier dissents from two of their conclusions. First, they have exaggerated the causal link between the international military situation and national military doctrine—where the choice, stark and invariable, seems to be between offense and defense. This, she calls, “balance-of-power” theory; and because that link appears to be so obvious, she calls it “rationalistic”, the perception

of “realists” (pp. 5, 11). Second, they have exaggerated the consistency and predictability of the military establishment’s devotion to offensive doctrine. This, she calls “functional” theory, because it assumes that an offensive “function” will reap higher status and budgetary rewards for the armed forces. Rephrased, and in reverse order, the book opens with the dual contentions that armies do not always choose the offense over the defence, and that a nation’s military doctrine is not so much determined by current threat assessments as by domestic political concerns. It is with this interpretive conclusion in mind that Kier turns to examine, in two chapters each, the French and British interwar experience.

Fortunately, her reading of the evidence seems to coincide with the arguments posed in advance. In the case of France, the choice of a defensive doctrine was determined by a political decision in 1928 to reduce the length of compulsory military service to one year. This decision meant that the army was rendered dependent upon short-service conscripts whom the high command regarded as inadequately trained for the offensive plans then in place. So it was not Hitler, not even Germany, which was responsible for the shift to a defensive doctrine. Rather, it was the particular “cultural” perspective of a senior officer corps which had no faith in the offensive capacities of reserve soldiers. At the same time, it was that same perspective, sharpened by the instincts of a civilian Left which associated professional soldiers with political repression, that explains why the French case study disputes the alleged predilection of military establishments for offensive doctrine.

Not surprisingly, given the confident claims of the opening chapters, the British experience is said to yield similar results. Even after 1934, when military and civilian officials alike had begun to admit the primacy of the German threat, even after calculations had been made about the peril that would be posed by German air bases operating from the conquered Low Countries, there was still a resolve on the army’s part to stick to the reigning defensive doctrine. So much for reasoned, balance-of-power argument. And so much for “functional” arguments, as well, because the British army did not switch to offensive doctrine as a way of securing more government funding for mechanized divisions. Instead, British officers and British civilians were intent on keeping costs to a minimum, partly as a way of bolstering the Treasury for the arduous economic demands which were expected to come in the event of another war, and partly as a way of addressing some of the social problems which already had arisen with the Depression. Thus, for a second time,

we have a case being made for rethinking the theoretical implications of work done by Posen and Snyder, and for a second time, affirming the role of domestic, institutional cultures.

So much for the gist of Kier’s argument, one which I have certainly simplified. What remains is to offer some further impressions of *Imagining War*, again from an historian’s vantage point. I have already commented on this work’s primary commitment to theoretical models, on the attendant set of premises and claims which precede the evidence from the case studies, on the culturally specific use of language, and on the incidence of repetition. There are also one or two other qualities which contribute to my unease.

One of those is the following. If the argumentation often seems unduly complex, the analysis itself borders on the simplistic. For instance, while it is true that Kier occasionally reminds us that she is not discarding strategic assessments in their entirety—as a factor in selecting military doctrine—the truth is that in exposing the “cultural” factor she comes close to promoting it above all else. The strength of that exposition makes me welcome this, her contribution, but I am less persuaded by the minimalization of the international situation. No doubt there is much to be said for the impact of one year service on the French shift from offensive to defensive doctrine, and for the impact of domestic ideology—neither of which, it would be fair to say, is a freshly-minted idea. But other contributory factors might include the Aristide Briand-Gustav Stresemann initiative at reconciliation of the mid-to-late 1920s, the associated build-up to the international Disarmament conference, even the early stages of the German army’s recovery and the consequently heightened risks of casualties incurred by a French offensive. None of these has attracted much of her attention.

One suspects, too, that more thought needs to be given to the connection between the defensive doctrine and the formulation of a strategic plan—devised by France’s military and civilian authorities—which envisaged a long war of attrition and which therefore put a premium on an initial, successful defence of French territory and resources. By the same token, Neville Chamberlain’s vaunted parsimony in connection with land rearmament surely does have an international connection, one which begins with the recognition of Germany’s primacy as threat to British security and which extends from that recognition to a policy of greater support for the air arm. In short, the government’s belief in the importance of the “fourth arm”, namely that of a strong economy and

currency, is not a purely “domestic” consideration.

As for the “functional” argument, most historians would be unsurprised to learn that not all soldiers favour offensive doctrine or all civilians, defensive doctrine. These are novel only within the context of an earlier theoretical construct which suggested that this is what we should expect, this is what is predictable. Thus, Kier’s invocation of real-life “actors” from the 1920s and 1930s, and her conclusion that they did not all run to form, are not especially eye-catching to the historian. Most would agree with her that one “cannot generalize about how civilians in different countries will view the effect of a particular military policy”, and most would share her scepticism about the suggestion that “similarly situated groups in different national settings have similar preferences” (pp. 87, 142). It is the social scientific model, the predictive theory, that has inspired her corrective touch, rather than the historical evidence we have gathered or even the way we have interpreted that evidence.

While disconcerting in itself, this tendency to inflate, as well as over-rehearse an argument is made the more troubling by other qualities. There are moments of carelessness as, for example, when we are told that support for pacifism increased, and declined, in France of the 1930s (p.85, n. 168). There are moments of confusion, for instance when the pivotal year 1928 is said to have marked the triumph of the “Left’s political agenda” and the “culmination” of the Right’s efforts to defend a professional army (pp. 65-66). More seriously, there are moments of over-statement. One cannot say, at least so categorically, that the French “ignored” the mobile potential of “tracked vehicles and air power”, or that they “ig-

nored” de Gaulle’s appeals for creating an armoured force (pp. 40, 55). The entire notion of the forward defence into Belgium—of which next to nothing is said here—was based on a motorized and mechanized force sweeping across the frontier to meet a German assault, a force which in fact may have proven to have been too mobile in May 1940. And it seems a little excessive to suggest that French governments “were always more worried about the domestic political role of the army than its military role against an external enemy” (p. 68). While there is truth within the claim, the claim is doubtfully true.

But that is one of the reasons why this is truly a provocative book. Kier argues aggressively, attempting to over- turn some of the generalizations which apparently have established themselves as part of the canon of international relations. And in their place she would insert two correctives. First, domestic culture is the key to understanding the origins of a nation’s military doctrine. Second, and with inadvertent irony, one should not generalize about national or institutional cultures. The second seems a worthy nostrum, the first useful hyperbole. Neither, I think, will significantly alter the way in which historians approach the subject of military doctrine. But for those whose interests cant toward the theoretical—and from it the predictive and utilitarian—and for those conversant with this particular scholarly dialect, this book is certain to stimulate further reflection and debate.

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