

# The British Generals Talk

John J. Mearsheimer

A Review Essay

Brian Bond, *British Military Policy Between the Two World Wars*, (New York: The Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press 1980), 419 pp.

During the final year of the Great War (1918), it was the British Army that played the principal role in the Allied offensives that led to the collapse of Germany. In those final offensives the British Army took 188,700 prisoners and 2,840 guns while the French, American, and Belgian Armies together captured 196,700 prisoners and 3,775 guns.<sup>1</sup> Approximately two decades later, on the eve of World War II, the British Army was in a woeful state, barely capable of influencing events on the continent. There were few divisions and even those were poorly trained and inadequately equipped.<sup>2</sup> The desperate state of the Army is reflected in the diary of General Ironside, who was the Chief of the Imperial General Staff for the first nine months of the war. Writing in September 1938, at the time of Munich, he remarked:

That I should possibly have to go on active service with such an Army at the end of my long service seems almost tragic to me. No Army, no tactical doctrine, and no co-operation with the R.A.F., no material, and hopeless confusion as to A.A. [anti-aircraft] Defence in England.<sup>3</sup>

In *British Military Policy between the Two World Wars*, Brian Bond traces the evolution of the British Army during the inter-war period, outlining in detail the decline of that army in the face of the growing German threat. He does

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I am grateful to the following people for their helpful comments and suggestions: Michael E. Brown, Eliot Cohen, Michael I. Handel, Barry Posen, Stephen P. Rosen, and Jack L. Snyder.

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1. John Terraine, *Ordeal of Victory* (New York: Lippincott, 1963), p. 480.
2. For an excellent description of the state of the British Army on the eve of World War II, see Brian Bond, *British Military Policy between the Two World Wars* (New York: The Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1980), chapter 11.
3. *Time Unguarded: The Ironside Diaries, 1937-1940*, ed. Colonel Roderick Macleod and Denis Kelly (New York: David McKay, 1962), p. 60. Also see *Chief of Staff: The Diaries of Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Pownall*, ed. Brian Bond (London: Leo Cooper, 1972), Volume I.

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*International Security*, Summer 1981 (Vol. 6, No. 1) 0162-2889/81/010165-20 \$02.50/0  
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an excellent job, and his book promises to stand as the definitive work on a subject which, until now, has received little attention.<sup>4</sup> Bond, however, is concerned with more than mere description. He is also interested in determining *why* the British Army was so ill-prepared for a war that had been looming for years. Specifically, he wants to know why "Britain went to war without a single effective armoured division or a coherent doctrine of armoured warfare."<sup>5</sup> In essence, this is a book that deals with the determinants of military force structure, a subject that has received considerable attention in the United States during the past two decades. Although Bond is an historian concerned with a single case, his arguments will be of great interest to social scientists and policy analysts concerned with the origins of force posture and doctrine.

#### *What Determines Force Structure?*

What is the principal determinant of force structure? There are basically three schools of thought on the question. The first is the Marxist school, which argues that the shape of a nation's military reflects its internal socio-economic structure.<sup>6</sup> National security policy is not the result of a rational assessment of foreign threats but is instead designed in response to class conflicts. The second school focuses on bureaucratic politics and thus shares the Marxist belief that domestic factors determine force structure. Proponents of this second school maintain that conflict among bureaucrats, whose main purpose is to further the interests of their organization, is the key to understanding

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4. Aside from Bond's book, the best examination of the British Army in the 1930s is N. H. Gibbs, *Grand Strategy, Volume 1* (London: HMSO, 1976). As the title indicates, this book deals with much more than just the Army. Furthermore, Gibbs relies almost exclusively on official Cabinet papers. Bond, on the other hand, uses War Office papers and private papers, in addition to Cabinet papers. This command of a wide variety of sources significantly enhances Bond's arguments. Nevertheless, the conclusions of the two are quite similar.

5. Bond, *Military Policy*, p. 180. Bond maintains that "Mechanization has rightly been regarded by military historians as the most important criterion for assessing the British Army's adaptability and openness to new ideas during the inter-war period." *Ibid.*, p. 127.

6. The adjective Marxist is used here in its broadest sense. For examples of this school, see Eckart Kehr, *Economic Interest, Militarism and Foreign Policy*, ed. Gordon Craig, trans. Grete Heinz (Los Angeles: University of Calif. Press, 1977); Eckart Kehr, *Battleship Building and Party Politics in Germany, 1894-1901*, ed. and trans. Pauline R. Anderson and Eugene N. Anderson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975); and James R. Kurth, "Why We Buy The Weapons We Do," *Foreign Policy*, Number 11 (Summer 1973), pp. 33-56.

force posture.<sup>7</sup> Whereas there has not been a wide following of the Marxist interpretation in the United States, the bureaucratic politics school has been extremely popular.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the conventional wisdom regarding the decline of the British Army between the World Wars has been that this was largely a result of narrow organizational interests thwarting the proposals of progressive thinkers.

The third school argues that force structure is a function of foreign policy considerations.<sup>9</sup> In effect, external threats determine in a basically rational manner what kind of military a state will develop. According to this view, Germany has always had a powerful army because of her location in the center of Europe, while Britain has primarily been a naval power because of her insular position. Bond falls within this third school. He argues that the British Army was unprepared for World War II because the government decided in the mid-1930s, after reviewing its foreign policy commitments, not to prepare the Army to fight a war on the European continent. Instead, the Army was first to concern itself with providing ground-based air defense

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7. See Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971); and Morton H. Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1974). It is very important to note that Allison distinguishes between an "Organizational Process" model and a "Bureaucratic Politics" model in his classic work. For an excellent discussion of the evolution of this school of thought, see Robert J. Art, "Bureaucratic Politics and American Foreign Policy: A Critique," *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Dec. 1973), pp. 467-490.

8. Some examples of the extensive literature are: Michael H. Armacost, *The Politics of Weapons Innovation: The Thor-Jupiter Controversy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969); Paul Y. Hammond, "Super Carriers and B-36 Bombers: Appropriations, Strategy and Politics," in *American Civil-Military Decisions: A Book of Case Studies*, ed. Harold Stein (Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1963), pp. 465-568; Warner R. Schilling, Paul Y. Hammond, Glenn H. Snyder, *Strategy, Politics, and Defense Budgets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962); Thomas L. McNaugher, "Marksmanship, McNamara and the M16 Rifle: Innovation in Military Organizations," *Public Policy*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Winter 1980), pp. 1-37; Demetrios Caraley, *The Politics of Military Unification: A Study of Conflict and the Policy Process* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966); Edmund Beard, *Developing the ICBM: A Study in Bureaucratic Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976); and John D. Steinbruner and Barry Carter, "Organizational and Political Dimensions of the Strategic Posture: The Problems of Reform," *Daedalus*, Vol. 104, No. 3 (Summer 1975), pp. 131-154.

9. See, for example, Otto Hintze, "The Formation of States and Constitutional Development: A Study in History and Politics," and "Military Organization and the Organization of the State," in *The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze*, ed. Felix Gilbert (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 157-215; J. R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (London, 1883; rpt. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971); Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and George W. Rathjens, "The Dynamics of the Arms Race," in *The Use of Force*, ed. Robert J. Art and Kenneth N. Waltz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), pp. 480-503. Also see Allison, op. cit., pp. 23-25.

for the homeland and second, with maintaining a small force that could police the empire. Consequently, mechanized forces were not raised, and no effort was made to develop a doctrine for armored warfare.

Bond challenges the argument that the British Army was in a pitiful state because of bureaucratic obstructionism on the part of reactionary officers (Colonel Blimps) determined to thwart the development of armored forces. He makes it clear that he rejects this "deeply rooted" interpretation of the past which casts the Army in such a negative light. "It was the lack of a definite European role more than 'military conservatism' which impeded the growth of armoured divisions in the later 1930s."<sup>10</sup> For the British, force structure was basically a function of strategic considerations.

#### *Britain's Strategic Dilemma (1918–1939)*

In the aftermath of World War I, the size of the British Empire reached its zenith. At the same time, Britain's position as a great power continued to decline.<sup>11</sup> The emergence of Japan, Germany, the United States, and the Soviet Union as world powers greatly increased the number of potential threats to Britain's sprawling empire. Britain, though, was unable to develop the large-scale military forces required to protect all of her empire. The reason was simple: her economy was not strong enough to support a military establishment which could meet all potential threats. One need not be a Marxist to recognize the validity of Engels' assertion that "Nothing is more dependent on economic pre-conditions than precisely the army and the navy."<sup>12</sup> Due to economic weakness, Britain was slowly losing her position as a first-class power.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, however, Britain had to protect an

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10. Bond, *Military Policy*, p. 8. Also see pp. 187–190.

11. For an excellent discussion of Britain's strategic dilemma and her efforts to deal with it, see Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment* (London: Pelican, 1974). Also see Gibbs, *op. cit.*; and Correlli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (London: Methuen, 1972).

12. Frederick Engels, *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science (Anti-Dühring)*, trans. Emile Burns (New York: International Publishers, 1939), p. 185.

13. See H. C. Hillmann, "Comparative Strengths of the Great Powers," in *The World in March 1939*, ed. Arnold Toynbee and Frank T. Ashton-Gwatkin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 366–507. It is clear from Hillmann's study that by the late 1930s, France and England combined were barely capable of matching German military potential (See especially pp. 439, 446). Also see Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Allen Lane, 1976). One of Kennedy's principal arguments is "that Britain's naval rise and fall has been so closely bound up with her economic rise and fall that it is impossible to understand the former without a close examination of the latter." (p. XV).

empire of grand proportions. As Correlli Barnett notes, "British responsibilities vastly exceeded British strength."<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the 1920s, the British did not have to confront their strategic dilemma. Germany was disarmed, Anglo-Japanese relations were good, and both the United States and the Soviet Union were isolationist-minded. Also, Italy, which was to become a major strategic headache in the mid-1930s, was on friendly terms with Britain. Appropriately, Britain's armed forces were allowed to atrophy. This situation changed dramatically in the 1930s, first with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, then with Hitler's rise to power, and finally with a rupture in Anglo-Italian relations. By the late 1930s, the situation was so grave that the British had to consider the possibility of fighting all three of these powers simultaneously. There were further complications: Franco-British relations were badly strained throughout the inter-war period; and there was the matter of the Soviet Union's growing strength. Britain was finally being forced to confront her strategic dilemma.

In response to this threatening international situation, the government established in 1933 the Defence Requirements Committee.<sup>15</sup> The DRC was to weigh the various threats facing Britain and devise an appropriate rearmament program. The DRC's first report, issued in February 1934, concluded that Germany was "the ultimate potential enemy against whom all our 'long range' defence policy must be directed."<sup>16</sup> Implicit in the report was the assumption that Britain would accept the commitment to fight against Germany on the continent. Therefore, the DRC recommended a balanced rearmament program, which meant it would be necessary to begin developing a strong army as well as a powerful navy and air force. For the British, the size and shape of the Army was greatly influenced by whether or not they planned to fight on the continent. In short, only a continental commitment could justify a large, modern army.

The recommendations of the DRC, however, were not accepted by the Cabinet. Most importantly, the Army's share of the proposed budget was slashed drastically. At the same time, no firm agreement could be reached on how to deal with the German problem. Over the next four years, while the Army languished, British policymakers debated the issue of whether to

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14. Barnett, *Collapse of British Power*, p. 120.

15. For a discussion of the DRC's role in rearmament, see Bond, *Military Policy*, chapter 7; and Gibbs, *op. cit.*, part II.

16. Bond, *Military Policy*, p. 195.

accept a continental commitment and build a large Army. Although a formal decision was not forthcoming until late in 1937, it was clear that Britain was drifting toward the rejection of such a commitment.

While a number of factors contributed to this drift in policy, the principal reason was economic. The world was in the midst of the Great Depression, and Britain simply did not have the economic base necessary to support a vigorous and balanced rearmament program. Furthermore, the Treasury, which played a significant role in rearmament policy throughout the 1930s, was dominated by fiscal conservatives who viewed a balanced budget as the *sine qua non* of economic recovery.<sup>17</sup> The Treasury viewed large increases in the defense budget as detrimental to the health of the economy, which was said to be "the fourth arm of defence." In light of the limited funds available for rearmament, it was clear that the Cabinet would have to assign priorities among the services.

On December 22, 1937, less than one year before Munich and less than two years before the start of World War II, the Cabinet formally rejected a continental commitment, thus eliminating the rationale for a large Army.<sup>18</sup> Instead, Britain would build a powerful air force and navy while the Army would concentrate on providing forces for the air defense of Great Britain and for policing the Empire—tasks which required relatively little money and manpower. Since the decision-makers had been moving towards abandonment of the continental commitment, the Cabinet decision was, in a certain sense, merely the dénouement of a long policy debate. At the same time, the decision was so decisive that it firmly established that the Army would not be allowed to prepare itself in any way for a war on the continent. There would be no armored divisions, no exercises to prepare for war, and no debates on how to use tanks on a European battlefield. The Army was to be what the *Official History* called "the Cinderella Service."<sup>19</sup> The heart of Bond's argument is that it was this clear-cut decision of December 22, 1937, coupled with the indecision of the earlier years, and not the obstructionist tactics of reactionary officers, that accounts for the dismal state of the Army when war

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17. For a discussion of the Treasury's role in rearmament, see G. C. Peden, *British Rearmament and the Treasury: 1932–1939* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1979); and Robert P. Shay, *British Rearmament in the Thirties: Politics and Profits* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977).

18. See Bond, *Military Policy*, pp. 257–259; and Gibbs, *op. cit.*, pp. 279–296, 467–486.

19. M. M. Postan, *British War Production* (London: HMSO, 1952), p. 27.

broke out in September 1939. The shape of the British Army was determined by the role it was assigned in Britain's strategic design.

Bond, however, is no crude determinist. He recognizes that there were reactionary officers in the Army who were adamantly opposed to mechanization. As an example, he cites the remarkable comments of a general, who argued in 1929 that

if we turn to the introduction of mechanical transport into the Army to replace the horse, and look into the faces of individuals who deal with the horse and the faces of men who deal with the machine, you will see in the latter what, I might almost call a lack of intelligence! Many of us remember the old hansom cab driver and the bus driver, cheery men who seemed to enjoy driving their horses. Now, what you see is a hunched-backed man leaning over a wheel looking like Cerberus. I consider that the horse has a humanising effect on men, and the longer we can keep horses for artillery and for cavalry the better it will be for the Army, because thereby you keep up the high standard of intelligence in the man from his association with the horse.<sup>20</sup>

Although there were officers who shared this viewpoint, they were hardly the dominant force within the Army. Bond argues that within the officer corps, there were "five categories of attitudes on mechanization" and only one of these contained "true reactionaries."<sup>21</sup> The officers within the other four categories all favored mechanization, although the members of one category, "the conservatives," were opposed to "the concept of independent armoured formations."<sup>22</sup> There is little doubt that officers from these four categories determined Army policy during the inter-war years.

However, the principal challenge to the view that bureaucratic politics stymied mechanization focuses on the state of the British Army in the 1920s and early 1930s. During that period, which was characterized by "public apathy, acute financial stringency, excessive caution at the War Office, and uncertainty over the Army's role," the British Army was "the leading pioneer in mechanization."<sup>23</sup> The continental armies carefully studied British exercises and also translated the works of Britain's leading experts on armored

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20. Bond, *Military Policy*, p. 130. Also see chapter 2, which is entitled, "The character and ethos of the British Army between the Wars."

21. Bond, *Military Policy*, pp. 130–132.

22. Bond, *Military Policy*, p. 131.

23. Bond, *Military Policy*, p. 160. Chapter 5 deals with the British Army and mechanization from 1918 to 1932.

war. In 1935, General Oswald Lutz, the father of Germany's panzer force, told a senior British officer that "the German tank corps had been modelled on the British."<sup>24</sup> Between 1920 and 1931, the British Army, which was run largely by generals who had been senior officers in World War I, was the forerunner in the development of armored forces.<sup>25</sup> It was in the years after 1932, when a new generation of officers was moving into the key leadership positions, that this lead was allowed to slip away.<sup>26</sup> How could it be, if the British Army was dominated by reactionaries, that it was "in the vanguard of military development in the 1920s and early 1930s"?<sup>27</sup>

There are other reasons for viewing the Colonel Blimp argument skeptically. Although the British Army was small and lacking in armor on the eve of World War II, it was the only army that "was entirely equipped with track and motor transport."<sup>28</sup> In the mid-1930s, the Army leadership had decided to mechanize all cavalry as well as infantry units, a considerable feat since the principal opponents of mechanization were very often officers from these two branches. In his classic study of the role of horse cavalry in various industrialized nations, Edward Katzenbach points out that in the period between the World Wars, Britain and Germany were clearly the most progressive countries.<sup>29</sup> He acknowledges that there were British officers who opposed reducing the role of the horse cavalry; however, like Bond, he notes that such reactionaries were in the minority and, consequently, quickly lost their battle to save the horse.

One of the problems with judging how reactionary or progressive the British Army was during the inter-war period is that there are no studies which compare the development of armored forces and armored doctrine in different countries. Comparative studies aside, there is no first-rate study of

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24. Quoted in Williamson Murray, "The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938-1939," Ph.D. Dissertation Yale University 1975, p. 13.

25. Because of peculiar personnel policies, senior Army officers were able to prolong their careers during the 1920s and 1930s. Consequently, the Army tended to be run by older officers. See Bond, *Military Policy*, chapter 2.

26. As Bond notes, "After the high point of the Mobile Force exercise in 1934 and the Army manoeuvres in 1935, military training became less rather than more realistic as war approached." *Military Policy*, p. 180.

27. Bond, *Military Policy*, p. 34. Also see pp. 160, 187-190.

28. Bond, *Military Policy*, p. 172.

29. Edward L. Katzenbach, Jr., "The Horse Cavalry In The Twentieth Century," in Art and Waltz, *op. cit.*, pp. 277-297. Katzenbach's conclusion is hardly surprising in light of Bond's discussion of the spectrum of views on mechanization (his five categories) within the British Army (see fn. 21).



the development of military strategy in the German Army during this period. It would be very helpful if there were some basis for comparison. Certainly, the tendency has been to view the Wehrmacht as highly receptive to new ideas and new weapons. For example, General von Seeckt, the head of the German Army in the 1920s, is invariably described as a progressive thinker of the first order. And, according to conventional wisdom, the leaders of the Wehrmacht, recognizing the tank's potential and the merit of Guderian's revolutionary ideas on armored warfare, developed the Blitzkrieg in the 1930s. A close examination of the record shows otherwise. Seeckt, his receptivity to ideas on restoring mobility to the battlefield notwithstanding, was advocating placing heavy reliance on horse cavalry as late as 1930.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, he was hardly enthusiastic about the tank. Regarding the Blitzkrieg, it was not until February 1940, when the high command was desperately searching for a strategy that would provide a decisive victory in France, that Guderian's ideas on armored warfare were finally accepted.<sup>31</sup> Even then, resistance remained.<sup>32</sup> Throughout the 1930s, Germany's military leaders were overtly hostile to the claim that the tank offered a means to revolutionize warfare.<sup>33</sup>

This does not mean that the German Army was dominated by reactionary officers. It was not. It merely demonstrates that there was strong resistance to new ideas on armored warfare in Germany. This is hardly surprising since there was little empirical evidence on which to judge the capabilities of large panzer forces acting independently of the more traditional elements of the Army. Because an officer did not accept Guderian's ideas on armored warfare did not mean that that officer was a hopeless reactionary. Of course, the Germans finally accepted Guderian's ideas, although it was only after the war had started. It is difficult to compare the British and German Armies, simply because it will never be known whether the British would have

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30. See, for example, the chapter entitled "Modern Cavalry" in von Seeckt's *Thoughts of a Soldier* (London: Benn, 1930).

31. This is clearly reflected in Guderian's memoirs, *Panzer Leader* (New York: Ballantine, 1972), pp. 63–75. Also see Matthew Cooper, *The German Army, 1933–1945* (New York: Stein and Day, 1978), chapters 1–15; Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, "Dunkirk 1940," in *Decisive Battles of World War II: The German View*, ed. H. A. Jacobsen and J. Rohwer (New York: Putnam's, 1965), pp. 29–68; Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (Chicago: Regnery, 1958), chapters 4–5; and Telford Taylor, *The March of Conquest* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958), chapters 2, 5.

32. See, for example, Guderian's description of the problems he encountered during the campaign in France in *Panzer Leader*, pp. 75–115.

33. See Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, chapters 2–3; and Murray, chapter 1.

realized, before the war began, the potential inherent in armored forces.<sup>34</sup> The Cabinet decision of December 22, 1937 robbed the British Army of the opportunity to prepare for a major European war. Nevertheless, it would not be surprising if, when the definitive work on the Wehrmacht of the 1930s is written, it is discovered that the number of progressive thinkers in the German Army is no greater than the number in the British Army and that the German Army had more than its share of Colonel Blimps.

One final point is in order concerning resistance in Britain to the introduction of armored forces. The British Army had traditionally been concerned with two very different missions: fighting on the continent and policing the empire. There was a sharp tension between these two missions since each required a different type of army. As Bond notes, the Army's "whole organization, recruiting system, training, equipment, and—not least—tradition were strongly oriented towards imperial defence."<sup>35</sup> Not surprisingly, that bias was the source of much of the resistance to developing an army comprised of large armored units which could engage the German Army, but would be basically useless on India's northwest frontier. Thus, there were legitimate reasons for opposing an army largely comprised of armored divisions trained to fight in Europe. Only a "definite decision" to prepare for a war on the continent could reverse that bias and that decision was not forthcoming until it was too late to make any difference.

#### *Liddell Hart and the British Army*

The British Army has been a much-maligned institution in this century. In the aftermath of the First World War, a torrent of books critical of Britain's wartime leaders poured forth. In the public's mind, the archetypical British general was a figure like General Curzon, the principal character in C. S.

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34. Had Britain built an army to fight on the continent, it is almost certain that she would have procured large numbers of tanks. As Katzenbach and Bond show (see fn. 29) the British Army accepted mechanization. Even the French, who clearly did not recognize the revolutionary potential of the tank, had a significant number of tanks. In fact, the French had more tanks than the Germans on May 10, 1940. Whether or not British tanks would have been organized into armored divisions (as the Germans did) or parcelled out among infantry and cavalry divisions (which was the French approach, although they did have some armored divisions) cannot be answered. Nor can one ascertain what would have been the British position on armored doctrine.

35. Bond, *Military Policy*, p. 188. Also see chapter 5, where Bond discusses the defense of India and the effect of this mission on the shape of the Army; and Correlli Barnett, *Britain And Her Army, 1509–1970* (New York: William Morrow, 1970).

Forester's popular novel, *The General*.<sup>36</sup> Curzon was patriotic and courageous, but he was also a stupid man, and thus dangerous. The military leaders who guided Britain during the inter-war years have been similarly described.<sup>37</sup> Consider, for example, Michael Howard's description of army behavior during the 1930s:

No measures were taken to enlarge the Army or to equip it to take part in large-scale land operations. No pressure came from within the Army itself for this to happen. Too many of its senior officers regarded it as a comfortable sanctuary from industrial society to welcome even the limited measures of streamlining and mechanisation which were forced on them after 1937 by Leslie Hore-Belisha, with Liddell Hart himself as his unofficial but powerful adviser; and a whole military generation went to its graves cursing the two men who had tried to drag it, kicking and screaming, into the twentieth century.<sup>38</sup>

However, no individual has done more to impugn the reputations of the leaders of Britain's Army in both World War I and the inter-war period than B. H. Liddell Hart, the famed strategist and military historian. His two volumes of *Memoirs* are a scathing indictment of Army leadership during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>39</sup> One of the most interesting aspects of *British Military Policy between the Two World Wars* is Bond's treatment of Liddell Hart, whose shadow is evident throughout this book. Bond makes it clear from the start that he intends to challenge the "very unfavourable impression created . . . by the satiric pens of brilliant mavericks and outsiders such as . . . Liddell Hart."<sup>40</sup>

Liddell Hart, however, was more than a mere critic of Army leadership. He was also one of the leading opponents of a continental commitment.<sup>41</sup>

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36. C. S. Forester, *The General* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1975).

37. See Bond, *Military Policy*, pp. 62–63.

38. Michael Howard, "Liddell Hart," *Encounter*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 6 (June 1970), p. 40. For an excellent example of the argument that the British Army was dominated by Colonel Blimps during the inter-war period, see Norman Dixon, *On The Psychology of Military Incompetence* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), chapter 9.

39. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Memoirs*, 2 vols. (London: Cassell, 1967). Also see B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Tanks*, 2 vols. (London: Cassell, 1959). J. F. C. Fuller also played a key role in discrediting the leaders of Britain's Army. See his *Memoirs of an Unconventional Soldier* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1936).

40. Bond, *Military Policy*, pp. 8–9.

41. Bond has actually written an excellent study on Liddell Hart, which deals at length with Liddell Hart's views on a continental commitment. See Brian Bond, *Liddell Hart: A Study of his Military Thought* (London: Cassell, 1977), chapters 3–4.

And his views carried weight. Not only was he a prolific author who corresponded with the governing elites, but he was also the military reporter for the prestigious *Times*. Throughout the 1930s, as the German threat became increasingly ominous, the intensity of Liddell Hart's opposition to fighting a war with France against Germany grew correspondingly. Since Bond's central thesis is that the rejection of a continental commitment accounts for the dismal state of the Army at the outbreak of the war, he is forced to point the finger of blame at Liddell Hart. What is particularly ironic about this is that in the realm of pure military strategy, Liddell Hart was a progressive thinker who wielded great influence. It is no exaggeration to say that he was the intellectual father of the Blitzkrieg. He understood the essentials of mobile armored warfare and was a staunch advocate of turning the British Army into a mechanized fighting force. His early views on armored war, which were borne out in World War II, are what give his *Memoirs* such credibility. However, as Bond points out, by arguing against the continental commitment, Liddell Hart undermined any possibility that the Army would build armored formations and come to accept his views on how these forces should be employed on the battlefield.<sup>42</sup> In this regard, Bond's book is a damning indictment of Liddell Hart.<sup>43</sup>

On another level, this book is a direct challenge to Liddell Hart's view of the history of the inter-war years. During that period, there was much hostility between Liddell Hart and many of the Army's leaders. For example, General Pownall, the Director of Military Operations and Intelligence, remarked in February 1939: "Liddell Hart . . . needs to be shot dead, a sinister influence who has done the Army much harm."<sup>44</sup> Among other things, many officers felt that Liddell Hart was undercutting their efforts to prepare the Army for an inevitable war on the continent.<sup>45</sup> Liddell Hart, on the other hand, felt that the generals were reactionaries who were not only opposed to modernizing the Army, but who also wanted to lead Britain into another World War I. Liddell Hart has had great success in arguing his case before

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42. Bond, *Military Policy*, p. 189.

43. There is an interesting aspect of Bond's confrontation with Liddell Hart that bears mentioning. When Bond was a student at Oxford, Liddell Hart moved to Bond's home village. The two became intimate friends, and it was Liddell Hart who encouraged Bond to become a military historian, even though Bond's tutors at Oxford felt that he was not suited for scholarship. Bond, by his own admission, owes much to Liddell Hart's friendship. See Bond's account of their association in *Liddell Hart*, pp. 1-4.

44. *Pownall Diaries*, p. 190.

45. See Bond, *Liddell Hart*, pp. 108-109; and Bond, *Military Policy*, pp. 176-177.

the court of public opinion.<sup>46</sup> This was largely the result of the power of the pen: Liddell Hart's written accounts of that period have never been matched by the generals, who themselves never rose to the challenge. Now, finally, the Army has a defender.

### *Appeasement and Military Policy*

Although Bond does not deal directly with the policy of appeasement, his book sheds light on that controversial subject. It is apparent that many British officers believed that another world war would soon engulf Europe, and Britain would find herself fighting on the continent. A number of civilians agreed with this assessment. Thus, there was resistance to jettisoning the continental commitment. However, once it was clear that Britain was not going to prepare for a European war, Army leaders generally supported the government's policy of appeasement.<sup>47</sup> They recognized that Britain really had no alternative as long as she refused to develop a powerful army with which to confront Germany. The military's greatest fear was that the government would commit them to a war for which they were not prepared. This is why the chiefs of staff were so adamantly opposed to holding staff talks with the French.<sup>48</sup> The chiefs believed that support of France, which would be implicit with staff talks, would embolden the French, who might then drag Britain into a war. Ironically, the generals' fears were realized when Chamberlain, without bothering to consider the military's viewpoint, committed Britain to the defense of Poland—a task for which the Army was completely unprepared.

Appeasement was certainly a policy with many dimensions.<sup>49</sup> Studies have traditionally focused on the moral and ideological bases of that policy. Recently, however, there have been a spate of books emphasizing the economic

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46. In his voluminous personal papers, Liddell Hart maintained copies of the many reviews of his books. His *Memoirs*, which were widely reviewed, often by eminent historians (A. J. P. Taylor, Michael Howard, Barbara Tuchman) received almost unanimous acclaim. See files 9/30/38 and 9/30/39 in his personal papers.

47. See Bond, *Military Policy*, pp. 235, 280. This is also one of the central conclusions of Gibbs' *Grand Strategy* (see p. xxi).

48. See Bond, *Military Policy*, pp. 227–229, 232–233, 272–277; Brian Bond, *France and Belgium 1939–1940* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1975), pp. 13–42; and Gibbs, chapter XVI.

49. See Paul N. Kennedy, "The tradition of appeasement in British foreign policy 1865–1939," *International Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Oct. 1976), pp. 195–215.

and military underpinnings of appeasement.<sup>50</sup> Bond's book, by graphically detailing the condition of the only service that could directly challenge Hitler, gives one a better understanding of why the British pursued this doomed strategy.

*Was There a Solution to Britain's Grand Strategic Dilemma?*

Britain reversed her position regarding a continental commitment on March 31, 1939 and then began the difficult task of re-building her shriveled Army. Before that task was accomplished, Hitler attacked Poland, and Britain found herself once again joined with France in what these two allies expected to be a protracted war of attrition where their superior economic strength would provide the basis for victory. These expectations were dashed in the spring of 1940 when the German Army overran France and pushed Britain's small expeditionary force off the continent at Dunkirk. In his final chapter, Bond briefly raises the questions that inevitably hang over every study dealing with British defense policy in the 1930s: was there a solution to the German problem? Could Britain have pursued a different rearmament policy which would have deterred Hitler? Or, accepting the failure of deterrence, could the British and the French have prevailed in a war with Germany? While paying due respect to the dangers of speculative history, Bond clearly suggests that the answer to these questions is yes.<sup>51</sup> Here, Bond is wrong; for Britain, there was no viable solution to the German problem.

Britain did not have the economic base to build a powerful army as well as a strong navy and air force. Since it was of vital importance that Britain have a formidable navy and air force, she was, in effect, consigned to having a small army. However, to deter Hitler, or to engage the Wehrmacht in a continental war, Britain needed a large, modern army. In 1939, and especially in 1940, the Cabinet appropriated the money to rearm the Army for a European war, while continuing to pour funds into the other two services. Although it was too late from a military point of view, this was the kind of balanced rearmament that was necessary if Britain hoped to contest Hitler. The problem, however, was that Britain was rapidly going bankrupt. Paul

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50. See, for example, Peden and Shay. Also see F. Coghlan, "Armaments, Economic Policy and Appeasement—Background to British Foreign Policy, 1931–7," *History*, Vol. 57, No. 190 (June 1972), pp. 205–216; and David Carlton, "Against the Grain: In Defense of Appeasement," *Policy Review*, No. 13 (Summer 1980), pp. 134–150.

51. See Bond, *Military Policy*, pp. 337–338.

Kennedy concisely summarizes Britain's predicament: "Britain could either have a balanced economy and vulnerable defences, or adequate armed forces and national bankruptcy, but not both."<sup>52</sup> As a consequence of the greatly increased spending on rearmament which started in 1939, Britain was bringing on its own economic ruin. To quote Kennedy again: "The final irony . . . was that the Treasury was perfectly correct in its Cassandra-like forebodings of the consequences of large-scale spending upon the armed forces by a country with such a weakened industrial base."<sup>53</sup>

Although Britain could not have supported a large-scale, balanced rearmament program, there is no doubt that more money could have been spent on defense throughout the 1930s without doing damage to the British economy. In fact, as we now know, increased government spending would have helped to lift the British economy out of its slump.<sup>54</sup> Still, Britain could not have afforded an army of continental proportions; and without one, it was virtually impossible to check Hitler, who controlled an army which became increasingly powerful with the passage of time. Britain might very well have been able to postpone Hitler's aggression by confronting him in the mid-1930s with a small, relatively modern army. Eventually, however, as Hitler's army grew in size, the British would have had to build a much larger army—which was impossible.

Bond recognizes that Britain did not have the economic strength to outfit a large army. His solution rests with developing "a small, well-equipped regular contingent with a spearhead of two or three armoured divisions."<sup>55</sup> As pointed out, this was not enough for the purposes of deterring Hitler, nor was it sufficient for fighting a war with the French against Germany. Bond notes that these British armored divisions might have been used for "a decisive counter-offensive in May 1940" after Kleist's panzers had crossed the Meuse River.<sup>56</sup> Assume he is correct and that the Allies had checked the initial German onslaught as they did on the Marne in 1914 and as the Soviets

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52. Paul N. Kennedy, "British Defence Policy Part II: An Historian's View," *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Dec. 1977), p. 122. Also see Barnett, *Collapse of British Power*, pp. 576–577.

53. Kennedy, "British Defence Policy," p. 17.

54. This is precisely what happened in Germany in the late 1930s. Robert Shay (fn. 17) presents a strong case in support of the argument that Britain could have spent considerably more money on rearmament. G. C. Peden (fn. 17), on the other hand, tends to support the position taken by the Treasury throughout the 1930s.

55. Bond, *Military Policy*, pp. 337–338.

56. Bond, *Military Policy*, p. 338. Gibbs makes the same argument in *Grand Strategy* (p. 524).

did in December 1941 at the gates of Moscow. What then? A long war of attrition would have ensued, as happened in World War I and on the eastern front in World War II, and Britain would have then been forced to raise a large army as she had done in 1914. However, she no longer had that capability.

This raises an important point. Most policymakers in Britain and France, as well as in Germany, believed that the Allies would prevail in a protracted war because they had superior economic strength.<sup>57</sup> Paradoxically, the opposite was the case. As was shown in World War II, the German economy was fully capable of supporting the Wehrmacht in a long war—especially after Eastern Europe was brought under German control.<sup>58</sup> It was the British economy which was unsuited for a protracted war. As noted, the British economy, which began spending large sums on defense in 1939–1940, was headed toward financial disaster. The *Official History* notes that “by the end of 1942” when the British were approximating the 20 division mark, “the limit of British mobilisation was near.”<sup>59</sup> By the fall of 1943, after Britain had just passed the 20 division mark, the *Official History* points out that “It . . . [was] clear that, left to her own production, Britain would be compelled to make drastic reductions in her combatant forces.”<sup>60</sup> Britain was in no position to fight a long war with Germany. As the *Official History* bluntly concludes, “the Government’s economic, financial and strategic pre-suppositions . . . [were] wrong and the earlier reliance on them extremely dangerous.”<sup>61</sup> The sun was rapidly setting on the British Empire.

Actually, there *was* a possible solution to the German problem. The Allies could have developed armies with real offensive capabilities which could have been used to remove Hitler from power before the Wehrmacht became a formidable opponent. Preventative war was the only way for the Allies to defeat Hitler, since the Allies did not have the capability to engage in a lengthy war of attrition. However, this was never a realistic alternative, even if there had been strong support for such a policy in Britain—which there

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57. Bond, *Military Policy*, pp. 276–286.

58. See United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Overall Economic Effects Division, *The Effect of Strategic Bombing on the German War Economy* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, October 31, 1945); and Alan S. Milward, *The German Economy at War* (London: Athlone, 1965).

59. Postan, *British War Production*, *op. cit.*, p. 224. All references to the number of British divisions are from Winston Churchill, *Their Finest Hour* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), p. 5.

60. Postan, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

61. Postan, *op. cit.*, pp. 113–114. Bond recognizes that Britain did not have the financial stability necessary to fight a long war. *Military Policy*, p. 250.



was not. The French, who provided the brunt of the Allies' ground forces, would have had to agree to such an offensive doctrine. As Charles DeGaulle discovered, such a policy was not acceptable to either the military or the political leadership in France.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, as long as a diplomatic solution seemed possible, no Allied leader would have been willing to launch an offensive against Germany. The danger of starting another World War I was too great. Paradoxically, when it was finally clear that diplomacy was not going to check Hitler, it was too late for a military solution.<sup>63</sup>

### *Lessons for the United States*

Bond's book is also very important because there are significant similarities between the foreign policy problems that the United States now faces and those that Britain confronted between the World Wars. Although the United States does not have an empire, it does have worldwide interests which require stationing large numbers of American troops abroad as well as maintaining an army that has the capability to deal with a wide variety of threats. Like the British, although for somewhat different reasons, the United States is especially concerned with maintaining stability in the Middle East, an area into which neither nation could easily project its power. Furthermore, because it too is basically separated from the European mainland, the United States has the option of abjuring a continental commitment. Nevertheless, the United States, like the British before it, has a vested interest in making sure that no single power is dominant on the continent. For Britain, Germany represented the principal threat in this regard (at least in the 20th century), while the United States is concerned with the threat of Soviet domination in Europe. Since the formation of NATO in the late 1940s, the United States has accepted the need for an explicit commitment to defend Europe. However, there has been opposition to that commitment in the past, the most

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62. DeGaulle's ideas are presented in his *The Army of the Future* (London: Hutchinson, n.d.). For a discussion of the failure of DeGaulle's proposals, see P. C. F. Bankwitz, *Maxime Weygand And Civil-Military Relations In Modern France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), chapter 4.; and Robert A. Doughty, "DeGaulle's Concept of a Mobile, Professional Army: Genesis of French Defeat?" *Parameters*, Vol. IV, No. 2 (1974), pp. 23-34.

63. For a detailed discussion of how the military balance shifted *against* the Allies between Munich and the outbreak of war in September 1939, see Murray; and Telford Taylor, *Munich* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1979), chapter 33. Jon Kimche argues that the Allies were still capable of launching a decisive blow against Germany in September 1939, while the Germans were dismantling Poland. See Kimche, *The Unfought Battle* (New York: Stein and Day, 1968).

prominent example being the Mansfield Amendment; and there is a real possibility that there will be a resurgence of opposition in the future.

As was the case with the British Army, there is tension within the U.S. Army over the two different roles for which it must prepare: fighting on the continent and fighting in the third world. A European war requires heavy armored and mechanized divisions capable of engaging in sustained combat against the Warsaw Pact. For contingencies outside of Europe, the Army requires light divisions which guarantee maximum flexibility.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, the doctrine and training for these two types of war is, in many respects, dissimilar.<sup>65</sup> General Edward Meyer, the U.S. Army Chief of Staff, recently told the *New York Times* that he believes that the Army "was becoming a heavy musclebound armored force designed almost exclusively to fight on the plains of Central Europe."<sup>66</sup> Meyer has checked that development and is aiming to build an Army that can deal with threats in such areas as the Persian Gulf, Korea and Latin America, as well as in Europe.

Certainly, there is the need for an army which can handle a variety of missions. However, the costs will be high. Building a capable rapid deployment force, for example, will require a significant commitment of economic resources. It should be emphasized that such a force will also place heavy demands on the Air Force, the Navy and the Marines. Then, there is the matter of manpower. Given present demographic trends and the fact that there seems to be little support for assigning women to combat roles, it is difficult to see how the United States can avoid a draft. Possibly, this could be avoided by significantly increasing the pay and other benefits that servicemen receive. However, this would involve real financial costs. If the draft is resurrected and the United States remains serious about a rapid deployment force, there will be much pressure to abandon or weaken the American commitment to NATO.

Of course, as was the case with British policymakers, the new Reagan Administration must not only concern itself with competing interests within the Army, but must also decide how to divide its limited resources among

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64. For a discussion of this dichotomy, see Sam Nunn, "What Forces for Asia? What Forces for Europe?" *The Washington Review of Strategic and International Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Jan. 1978), pp. 10-18.

65. The Army's capstone field manual, for example, was written with a European war in mind, and would be of little value in a conflict like Vietnam. See FM 100-5: *Operations* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, July 1, 1976).

66. Richard Halloran, "\$40 Billion Is Urged To Modernize Army," *New York Times*, November 30, 1980, p. 33.

three competing services. There is already significant pressure to increase substantially the size of the Navy, with an emphasis on building more large nuclear aircraft carriers. Also, it appears certain that the Administration will develop and deploy a new strategic bomber, while it continues to procure cruise missiles—which were once billed as a cost-efficient alternative to the penetrating bomber. Renewed interest in the bomber points to the fact that there is a consensus that the strategic nuclear forces have been neglected for too long, and it is therefore time to replace many of the aging systems. It was once felt that SALT might provide a way of limiting expenditures on these forces. However, arms control holds no real hope for the foreseeable future. Britain too tried arms control.

Although there is a marked similarity in the nature of the problems facing the two countries, there are also differences. Perhaps the most important difference is that the U.S. economy is stronger, in absolute terms as well as in relationship to other countries, than was the British economy in the inter-war period.<sup>67</sup> The U.S. economy can support a large and powerful military. Nevertheless, there are significant problems of an economic nature which promise to complicate efforts to increase U.S. military capabilities. To begin with, the hegemonic position of the U.S. in the world economy is declining, although the extent of this diminution of strength is not evident. Moreover, the military implications of this developing situation are not clear, although it is certainly a disturbing trend. Secondly, the international economy is in poor shape and, related to that, the United States has been unsuccessful in its efforts to defeat stagflation. Like British policymakers in the inter-war period, the Reagan Administration maintains that American economic ills can only be cured by balancing the budget. Of course, the new Administration assumes that it will be able to cut overall government spending while significantly increasing defense spending. This is a dubious assumption since it requires effecting large reductions in social welfare programs while defense spending is accelerated. To implement such a policy in a democracy will be no mean feat. Again, the British case offers a lesson. In the 1930s, the large sums of money that British governments devoted to social services served as a brake on the rearmament effort.<sup>68</sup>

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67. There are two other differences which should be noted. First, there were no nuclear weapons in the 1930s. Second, although the Soviet Union is hardly *status quo*-oriented, the present Soviet threat to world peace pales in comparison with the threat posed by Hitler in the 1930s.

68. See Kennedy, *Naval Mastery*, pp. 270–272.

The bottom line is that in the 1980s, American decision-makers are going to have to make some difficult decisions about the kind of military this country needs to protect itself as well as its vital interests abroad. The resources needed to develop forces which can meet every threat will not be available. Priorities will have to be assigned. Although the British case provides no solutions for the problems America faces, much can be learned by examining the policies Britain pursued as she sought to solve her strategic dilemma.