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The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation

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that began in 1943, could not have been carried out as successfully without American help. Van Tuyl agrees with all other observers that trucks, which increased the mobility of the army and were something that the Russians were not in a position to produce in quantity, were the most significant form of help. In addition, communication equipment, radar, and other items of technology made a difference in the performance of the Soviet troops. He rejects the argument of those who say that lend-lease, by speeding up Russian advance, enabled the Soviet Union to occupy Eastern Europe. He rightly points out that if the war had lasted longer more Allied soldiers would have died and that therefore American aid to the Soviet Union during World War II was a good investment: it saved American lives.

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Offer, Avner. *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. 449pp.

Howard, Michael. *The Continental Commitment: The Dilemma of British Defence Policy in the Era of the Two World Wars*. London: Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Ashfield Press, 1989. (originally published London: Smith, 1972). 176pp.

British strategy can choose either a continental commitment or an Atlantic orientation. The former has meant

that the country seeks to exert direct influence on the power of Europe. This was the course chosen by Castlereagh, by those who supported France after war began in 1914, and by those who after 1945 saw Britain's frontier to be on the Rhine. Generally, today, it is the choice of those who see Britain's future in Brussels. In military terms, the continental commitment has meant soldiers on European soil. The Atlantic orientation has meant looking outward over the sea, a maritime and imperial strategy which recognizes the islands' dependence for food and materials on the far-flung Commonwealth and the Western Hemisphere. In military terms, Atlantic orientation has meant protecting the sea lanes and establishing naval blockades. The adherent of one orientation chooses land power; the other, sea power.

The blockade in the First World War was based on a sea power alliance. This Avner Offer traces to a specialization of world food production that in the nineteenth century bound the granaries and grazing lands of the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand to the conscious British decision to import food and to let its own agriculture run down. The British overcame this vulnerability in time of war by stressing the ties of empire. There were two strategic consequences of their Atlantic orientation. One was the necessity to make sure the alliance which delivered the food stayed firm. Offer argues that the notion of a common front against a Yellow Peril in the

Pacific countries had cemented the tie (he does not include in his discussion India, a large prewar grain exporter, or Russia, the Danubian lands, or the Argentine). The second consequence was the assumption that blockade would be a decisive weapon.

Offer knows that personality counts in strategy formation. The blockade strategy was put forward by the fire-eating Admiral Fisher, the courtier Lord Esher, and the agenda-setter Maurice Hankey. They encouraged naval officers in the thinking that the German conflict was a commercial struggle that had to be decided by war. They won the endorsement of influential Dominion ministers. The blockade doctrine, in this interpretation, was the product of a broad sea power effort in Edwardian England to use the Dominions to avoid a mass commitment of British manpower. The question is: did it make strategic sense?

The army and the Foreign Office did not think so. For them, the balance of power in Europe was the key to home defense, and that meant soldiers in France. Michael Howard, who takes the story up to the Second World War, describes the debate over how to configure British defense with remarkable clarity. He wrote his concise survey in 1971, as he admits in a new preface, as an argument "with that older generation of naval and military historians, from Julian Corbett to Herbert Richmond and Liddell Hart, who had urged the need for a maritime strategy, a specific 'British Way in Warfare' based on the

avoidance of any Continental Commitment." That position, said the pro-Nato author, no longer pertained.

Two questions remain. First, was the British choice really either-or? The answer is: obviously not. British strategy in both wars involved both restoring a balance of power and maintaining a maritime-imperial-seaborne raw material connection. Germany had to be defeated on land. British participation demanded command of the seas. Overseas allies were necessary for food, and for support. The empire fell away as a consequence of British absorption in the vital continental conflicts, not a loss of sea control.

The second question is: what was the importance of the blockade in the first war? Here Offer gives an original interpretation. The influence of the blockade and of the maritime alliance became obvious during the armistice period. At that time it gave the overseas powers who controlled the international food economy a strong hand in shaping the peace, for they were able to sustain the British while they deprived the Germans. Germany was not starved into defeat, Offer makes clear, although the blockade did have political consequences. It became part of German domestic politics in two ways. It imposed a shortage of food during the winter of 1918-1919 which strengthened the hands of the forces of reaction against the forces of revolution. At the same time the blockade, which continued after the shooting had stopped, allowed the Germans to reject the legitimacy of

the allied demands even as it forced the government to bend to the Allies' will. Because a blockade acts against the civilian populace, its maintenance after the Armistice transformed a "just war" against the imperial government into an "unjust" war against civilians, and thereby helped the Germans transfer the target of their negative verdict on the peace treaty from Berlin to Versailles.

These books show a maritime strategy in all its complexity. Offer shows how the British sought a strategy for home security based on a seaborne agricultural alliance, and Howard shows why that was not enough. The two books are fruitful to read together.

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Paschall, Rod. *The Defeat of Imperial Germany: 1917-1918*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1989. 247pp. \$22.95

This excellent book comprises a collection of battle histories that illustrate various attempts to restore maneuver to the Western front during 1917-1918. The engagements addressed include French general Nivelle's failed offensive of spring 1917; British field-marshal Haig's tragic offensive in Flanders during the summer and fall of 1917; the Italian defeat known as Caporetto in October 1917; the tank battle at Cambrai in November 1917; the extended German offensive of March-

July 1918; and the botched American Meuse-Argonne offensive of September-November 1918. Paschall manifests sympathy for the much maligned leaders of the time and maintains that the circumstances precluded a decision by maneuver. Victory came to Marshal Foch because he recognized the necessity of war by attrition.

Each battle study is of great interest, reflecting the author's ability to synthesize recent scholarship and his original observations. The discussion of tactics is the soul of the book. This emphasis allows Paschall to dispel a goodly amount of the mythology that surrounds 1917-1918, especially in America. Paschall is both a skilled professional soldier and a seasoned professional historian who seeks to enlighten a broad audience about a much neglected conflict. Knowledge of World War I is essential to an understanding of later events, including World War II.

The author's choice of battles is curious however, because none are catastrophic German defeats. The German Army repulsed both Nivelle and Haig in 1917. Italy suffered a sweeping defeat at Caporetto. The British assuredly achieved a startling advance at Cambrai, but Ludendorff soon counterattacked successfully and erased the initial territorial loss. From March to July 1918, Ludendorff conducted five offensives, some of them remarkably successful. He suffered defeat only in the sense that he did not accomplish his main goal, which was to achieve a decision before the