

1983

The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880-1914

Richard Megargee

Paul M. Kennedy

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Megargee, Richard and Kennedy, Paul M. (1983) "The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880-1914," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 36 : No. 4 , Article 31.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol36/iss4/31>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

250 pages—the rest of the book turned over to notes and an adequate index—the papers deal with various aspects of “American Objectives and Strategy in Asia”; “American Pacification and Occupation in Asia”; “Impact of the Asian Experience on the American Military”; and “Impact of the American Military on Asian Societies.” The papers, which begin with Akira Iriye’s underscoring of the role of power in “Western Perceptions and Asian Realities,” range from the commonplace to the extraordinary.

The best of them include Roger Dingman’s “American Policy and Strategy in East Asia, 1898-1950”; Ronald Spector’s “The First Vietnamization”; and Roy Flint’s “The United States Army on the Pacific Frontier, 1899-1939.” The most original, and for my money worth the cost of admission, is Sadao Asada’s “Japanese Perceptions of the A-Bomb Decision, 1945-1980,” which ought to be required reading for everybody claiming to be in the field.

The wartime generation in Japan, according to Asada, tended to be more tolerant of the A-bomb decision than younger people who have never experienced war. For reasons that are not always clear, Japanese youth are susceptible to both the “Atomic Diplomacy” thesis and to a retrospective sense of victimization expressed in the racist interpretation of Truman’s decision, the latter generally reinforced by analogy with incidents that occurred in such places as My Lai.

Similarly, Japanese historians are polarized on the issue. On the one side are well-organized leftists who assert “that the *real* American aim in the atomic bombing of Japan was to pressure the Soviet Union into making concessions in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland,” though this same group appears oblivious to the fact that the Soviet Union declared war a week sooner than the pledge Stalin had given Truman at Potsdam in order not to miss out on the kill. On the other side is a group of more balanced historians, familiar with American works, who place particular emphasis on organizational momentum and the like.

The impact of the historical controversy on other aspects of Japanese life, including the case for nuclear armament, completes this interesting story. All in all, the United States Air Force Academy team that put this symposium together ought to be commended.

JOSEPH M. SIRACUSA
University of Queensland

Kennedy, Paul M., ed. *The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880-1914*. Winchester, Mass.: Allen & Unwin, 1979. 282pp. \$28.50

This book is a compilation of eleven articles on the war planning of the major powers prior to the First World War. The selections are designed to illuminate the dynamics of the military planning process, the impact of war plans on foreign policies and the role of war plans in

precipitating the July Crisis. There are studies of bizarre German naval plans for attacks on England and the United States, of proposed German military operations against Denmark, Holland and, through the Schlieffen Plan, Belgium and France, and of German-Austro-Hungarian coordination (or lack thereof) of military strategies in the East. French Plan XVII is critically examined, along with separate analyses of Great Britain's confused prewar naval planning, the evolution of her continental strategy, and even British military applications of cable communications. Articles on Russian mobilization plans and even for what passed for United States war plans are included.

These selections are prefaced by the editor's fine introductory essay on the hitherto unknown phenomenon of systematic war planning in peacetime. This is an activity Kennedy attributes to late nineteenth-century achievements of German military science, the bureaucratization of governments, rapid technological change, the magnitude and complexity of industrial warfare, and the accompanying professionalism of the military, all stimulated by competitive nationalism and imperialism.

The editor, not surprisingly, contends that these articles reveal war planning to reflect political and ideological assumptions (war as an extension of politics, perhaps) more purely technical military considerations. And he notes that, despite all the effort devoted to them, the plans lacked effective army-navy or inter-

allied coordination, failed to appreciate the realities of actual combat, and were characterized by shifts from realistic defensive strategies to ruinous offensive plans.

Kennedy further claims that war planning had a major impact on policy making in all the great powers, but only in Central and Eastern Europe, where monarchs were commanders in chief in a *de facto* as well as *de jure* sense, did war planning serve to militarize policy significantly; in Western Europe civil authority managed to maintain its preeminent control over policy, if not always over strategy. And it was only in Germany, he feels, that war plans involved the deliberate violation of neutral territory simply to satisfy military necessity, and that mobilization meant war; for even though German leadership may not have been irreversibly committed to war by virtue of their plans, the offensive nature of those plans reflected a German attitude of aggrandizement so that in time of crisis the government had no inclination to alter operations long anticipated and imperative to success. All of which does not prompt Kennedy to assert that it was German planning that was responsible for war, but, as he puts it, this "makes Berlin the centre of the 1914 crisis in military terms," as well as political.

This collection of essays will appeal to a rather limited audience. The specialist may find it convenient to have some of these articles under one cover, but most of them were published ten or more years ago and

have been incorporated into the general literature on the subject. The casual reader, once past the introduction, will face a succession of detailed and often esoteric studies with little apparent correlation.

Readers seeking resolution of the question of the responsibility of war planning for producing the Great War will also be disappointed. Although Kennedy's "main purpose" in comparing these war plans is to ascertain whether German plans gave her a unique responsibility for that war, this collection provides little conclusive evidence. Knowing that Berlin was "the centre of the crisis in 1914 in military terms," is not quite the same as allocating unique responsibility. Few of the essays in themselves suggest an answer to this question, and none of them directly address the issue of responsibility. On the contrary, these selections provide a dismal story of British tailoring war plans to their army's need for a mission, French devising plans based more on morale than the realities of geography or weapons' capabilities, German dabbling in grandiose continental and transatlantic strategies while ignoring the imperatives of coordination with their principal ally, Russian

harnessing indecisive policy to inflexible mobilization and operational plans, and American evolution of unrealistic blueprints for campaigns which never came in theaters of little relevance. The dishonors among the great powers seem about evenly divided in terms of foresight, realism of preparations, policy-strategy coordination and even military intervention in politics, with the Germans coming out ahead (or behind) primarily in terms of efficiency. The total impression is one of unrealistic, uncoordinated and unregulated operational schemes.

As one might expect of an age when war as an extension of policy carried few legal or moral constraints, most parties considered their strategies and war plans from a perspective of ultimate military advantage rather than juridical or ethical norms. German, Russian, Austro-Hungarian, French, and British planning was guided primarily by military necessity and amoral calculations of interest. For such an age, it is difficult to make assessments of war guilt or responsibility on the basis of war plans alone.

RICHARD MEGARGEE
Naval War College