

Scott D. Sagan, "1914 Revisited," *International Security* (Fall 1986), pp. 151-75
Review by Solomon Major, Friday, March 11, 2000

Quick Summary: This article concurs with Posen's book, *The Sources of Military Doctrine*, that the "cult of the offensive" literature (see, for example, Snyder and Van Evera), misunderstands the catalysts of the offensive doctrines undertaken by the combatants on the eve of the First World War. Sagan complements Posen's book on the origins of WWII strategy by arguing that, while organizational interests in favor of offensive doctrines often play some role in determining strategy, "By focusing on the organizational interests of the professional military, the 'cult' theory has overlooked the more fundamental causes of WWI offensive doctrines: the political objectives and alliance commitments of the great powers" (p. 153). Sagan goes even further, arguing that the 'cult' literature, focusing as it does on the unfortunate outcome of WWI, fails to understand the utility of offensive doctrines on the behalf of the Allies. Had they not been as aggressive as they were, the (German) Schlieffen Plan may have succeeded with results that were not just "unfortunate" but disastrous for Western Europe. Sagan closes by noting the superior explanatory power of a "Strategic Interests Model" (read: realist balancing) over the "Cult of the Offensive Model."

What is the central puzzle?

This article is not addressed to a particular puzzle as much as it is a critique of a particular literature—namely the one concerned with "The Cult of the Offensive." The puzzle that the "Cult" literature seeks to address is why, in 1914, all of the engaged European states adopted offensive doctrines when 1) defense seemed to be dominant and 2) doing so resulted in the largest collective military disaster in the history of the world to that point. Their explanation revolves around the argument that organizational imperatives within the militaries of the various countries in favor of the offense overrode good political and operational sense. Sagan's article questions whether this explanation is a satisfactory one.

What is the central answer(s)?

Basing his arguments, to a large extent, on those made by Posen (1984), Sagan argues that, while organizational factors can play a role, legitimate strategic interests play a greater role. Systemic incentives, in this case, trumped organizational preferences and though the outcome of 1914 strategies was unfortunate the strategies selected, given the strategic interests of those involved, were still "rational" from a realist perspective.

Sagan's argument that "while the 'cult' theory correctly identifies the problem of offensive instability, it ignores the critical strategic dangers that would have resulted if European statesmen had adopted purely defensive strategies in 1914" (p. 154), focus on three central themes:

1. Offensives Might Often Succeed

Was the (German) Schlieffen plan doomed to fail? Perhaps not. In fact, it came very close to reaching its objectives. Simply arguing that offensive doctrines are irrational because they are not in countries' best interests because they do not work or because they are disconnected to states' strategic imperatives is not an empirically tenable hypothesis.

2. What is the "Offense/Defense Balance Anyway?"

"Cult" theories tend to suggest that WWI took place during a period of "*defense dominance*" that is to say that technology determined outcomes. States that failed to heed technological imperatives—which favored the defensive—were doomed to fail. But what if it was quality of troops (and their officers), rather than technology, that determined the success or failure of a campaign? Perhaps French and Russian incompetence, rather than their offensive strategies, was the cause of their failings. "Cult" theories underspecify the degree to which qualitative variables determine outcomes.

3. Alliance Commitments

Q. What if the French would have adopted a defense-only strategy? **A.** The Germans would have finished off the Russians quickly and then destroyed the Western powers piecemeal (see French policy prior to WWII and the piecemeal defeats of their eastern allies in Sudetenland and in Poland). **Q.** What if the British would have adopted a defense-only strategy? **A.** The Germans would have finished off the French quickly and the British would have found themselves facing a continental hegemon—something they had been working against for centuries. **The moral:** Offensive strategies were a function of necessity and alliance commitments, *not* a result of out of control military organizations.