

# DEFENCE OR ATTACK?

## THE BRITISH ROLE IN WAR

### II.—AFTER 600 YEARS

#### From Our Military Correspondent

The recent development of the Army has shown a revolution in means of movement, some evolution of methods, and an increasing reversion of outlook to Continental warfare. That reversion is perhaps more subconscious than conscious. As time has passed, and historical evidence has become clearer, the mistakes committed in 1914-18 are more readily recognized by soldiers. It is only when some outside criticism seems to them an attack on their friends or profession that they are prompted to close their ranks, and, like a tank coming under fire, "close down" their minds. And the present generation of soldiers is sincerely determined to avoid the unjustifiable optimism as well as the operative blunders of the last. Yet the increasing knowledge of what ought to be avoided is accompanied, curiously, by a growing movement along a line which must lead to the same end. Step after step that is taken, and scheme after scheme that is devised, manifest the trend towards a repetition of what happened in the last War.

While the picture is made to appear different by the new equipment, closer examination shows that the Army at home provides a field force modelled on the identical pattern of the force that went out to France in 1914, dominated by the same strategic idea, and trained on what is, broadly, the same tactical basis. If it should happen that war came again on the Continent there would be all too much prospect of repeating the same sequence—commitment, entanglement, illimitable expansion, mass conscription, futile sacrifice, and national exhaustion, leading not only to prolonged impoverishment but immediately to the weakening of our influence over the restoration of peace.

#### WHY A WRONG START?

If we start on such a course the best chance of stopping short lies, ironically, in the possibility that the new conditions of war may produce a quicker stagnation on land. But why start? The cause may only be that it is easier to build on what is familiar than to think out a new design, especially when working under the compulsion of urgency to retrieve long neglect. But the prospective consequences are so serious as to require the most careful consideration of any steps taken in such a direction. Those who are not absorbed in the bustle of preparation nor bowed under the burden of execution may be as well placed as any to watch the path.

The previous article has set forth the reasons why the prevailing preparation of an army for the offensive in a Continental war appears to be no better than a gamble on an outside chance. That conclusion is reinforced, to a much greater extent than is commonly appreciated, by the lessons of historical experience in general, and our own experience in particular. While many are coming to realize the increasing difficulties

of the attack in modern warfare, it is a common assumption that attack has usually paid in the past. There is no greater military fallacy. Analysis shows that in the majority of the battles which are engraved in the pages of history the loser was the army which was the first to commit itself to the attack. That predominance of the advantage on the side of the army which has awaited the enemy's attack becomes still more marked if we examine the roll of the battles which had any decisive effect. Even Clausewitz, the father of nineteenth and twentieth century offensive doctrine, took care to point out that the defensive was the stronger form of action, although he could not see how, of itself, it could produce a decision. That was true so far as the positive overthrow of the enemy was necessary for the fulfilment of the purpose in war. Even so, there has always been a method by which the immediate advantages of the defence and the ultimate advantages of the attack could be combined. History offers, to those who will inquire of it objectively, overwhelming evidence that the counter-offensive, after the enemy has overstrained himself in the offensive, is the most decisive form of action.

But in the present century there have been developments which give cause for doubt whether any form of offensive action remains essential to the purpose of a non-aggressive State in war, a State concerned only to maintain its own interests and those of its friends. At the time Clausewitz wrote, as for all time past, even the largest forces were small in comparison with the area to be covered, and this limitation of their capacity for secure defensive extension made a purely defensive attitude unsafe. Whatever its local advantages, these were usually outweighed by its general risks. But since then there has been a great increase in the size of forces, accompanied by a still greater increase in the range of weapons, and the combination has produced a fundamental change in the relationship of space to force.

### CLUMSY, RIGID, TOUGH

Another cognate question is that of national aptitude. If any people have found by experience that their men are inspired in attack and cannot endure in defence, they may be justified in accepting the gamble of attack as the lesser of two risks. We have no such justification. Our own experience follows a counter course. The romantic self-glorification which all nations indulge concerning their military record has obscured from us, at least in recent times, our own strength and weakness. It is wise, however, to see ourselves as others have seen us.

In his masterly appreciation of the situation on the eve of 1918 Wetzell, the head of the operations section of the German Supreme Command, urged that the German military aim ought to be guided by the character of their respective opponents. He summed up the British as a "strategically clumsy, tactically rigid, but tough enemy," while of our Allies he said, "The French are better in the attack and more skilful in the defence, but are not such good stayers as the British." It is now a matter of history how heavily Germany paid for Ludendorff's disregard of this and the other conditioning factors laid down by his strategic adviser. But are we any wiser in our disregard of it when we train and otherwise prepare our own Army for the offensive in a future war? For it is not a new condition, nor one that can be simply dismissed as due to the hasty improvisation of large armies. We are apt to look back on the sixteenth century as an age when our national audacity and initiative was at its peak, a peak surpassing that of all contemporaries. The view may have been justified by the performance of individuals: our soil has always been good for the growth of outstanding men, but it does not appear to have been true of the general level. As Sir Charles Oman has reminded us in his recent "History of the Art of War in the Sixteenth Century," Continental opinion reserved its highest admiration for the Swiss, and rated the