

Victory to Defeat: The British Army 1918-1940



by Ralph Berry

'The difference today is that while the army may not have the right equipment (and certainly not enough of it), or many men, it does at least have doctrine.' Saved! We might be landed with duff equipment, and not enough of that, but with Doctrine all will be well. The authors of this nonsense are Richard Dannatt and his colleague Robert Lyman. Perhaps tactfully Dannatt does not mention on the cover that he was formerly chief of the defence staff. One does wonder if General Dannatt had anything to do with the shortfalls over which he presided. I suppose not. Until recently Dannatt wrote regularly for *THE SPECTATOR*, extolling the virtues and chances of the Ukrainian cause. He has been quietly dropped now.

Let's stay with Doctrine, now charged with saving the Army. Doctrine has a chequered history. Germany had a major Doctrine when they started the Great War in August 1914. It

was the Schlieffen Plan, over which the finest minds in Prussian militarism had poured for a dozen years. Everyone knew about it. By August 15 those same minds knew that Schlieffen Plan had failed to deliver, and that the war was taking another course. (France too had a Doctrine. It bled the country white.)

What then is wrong with Doctrine? It is fixed, and it is known. You cannot have a covert doctrine, known only to the instructed few. They will sell it or, moved by conscience, impart it to the enemy. You can depend on top scientists to have grave doubts about their life work.

The more important they are, the graver the doubts.

The nominal enemy is extremely well informed, better than all but a few on the doctrine side. Stalin knew all about the A-bomb when the uppermost echelons of British society knew nothing. The enemy may then choose to imitate the discovery of his adversary or devote his energies to messing it up.

These betrayals, feints, deceptions all skirt round the central question of the war itself. When the Russo-Ukraine war broke out I wrote for this journal an article whose thesis was contained in the title 'Athens and Melos', following the story in Thucydides. Athens, a much more powerful state, had made a tax demand on Melos which was refused. Athens then came back with a classic statement of its position:

'You know as well as we do' said the Athenian representatives to the hapless Melians, 'that when these matters are discussed by practical people, the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.' In our own time this bleak doctrine has been challenged by the devotees of rules-based order.

They have had no striking success. Russia has not been beaten, nor will it be. The Ukrainian soldiers have been

slaughtered to no purpose other than that chimera independence. Their womenfolk have gone into exile, as have their children. The pauperized nation relies on the kindness of strangers.

The Athenians have made their point. What doctrine will our Melians now reveal?