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Edited by Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox and Alvin Bernstein

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Introduction: On strategy

WILLIAMSON MURRAY AND MARK GRIMSLEY

The concept of “strategy” has proven notoriously difficult to define. Many theorists have attempted it, only to see their efforts wither beneath the blasts of critics. B.H. Liddell Hart’s well-known definition – “the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy” – may suggest the limitations of the definitional approach, for this forthright but unhappy example restricts the word strictly to *military* affairs, whereas in practice strategy operates in a much broader sphere.¹

In fact, such straightforward definitions go fundamentally astray, for strategy is a process, a constant adaptation to shifting conditions and circumstances in a world where chance, uncertainty, and ambiguity dominate. Moreover, it is a world in which the actions, intentions, and purposes of other participants remain shadowy and indistinct, taxing the wisdom and intuition of the canniest policymaker. Carl von Clausewitz suggests that in such an environment, “principles, rules, or even systems” of strategy must always fall short, undermined by the world’s endless complexities. While models and categories may assist analysis, they can offer no formulas for the successful framing of strategy or conduct of war. Theories all too often aim at fixed values, but in war and strategy most things are uncertain and variable. Worse, such approaches deflect inquiry toward objective factors, whereas strategy involves human passions, values, and beliefs, few of which are quantifiable.²

Consequently, reality weds strategic planning tightly to its larger context. Political objectives play their role, of course, as do diplomatic, economic, and military resources. These elements are obvious, but other factors also influence strategic thinking in subtler but equally vital ways. Geography helps determine whether a given polity will find itself relatively free from

¹ B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York, 1967), p. 335.

² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, 1976), pp. 134, 136.

threat or surrounded by potential adversaries. Historical experience creates preconceptions about the nature of war and politics and may generate irresistible strategic imperatives. And ideology and culture shape the course of decision-makers and their societies in both conscious and unconscious ways. Not only may ideology and culture generate threats where a different perspective would see none, but their influence usually shapes perceptions about alternatives. Moreover, the nature of a government's organization may largely determine the sophistication of its strategic assessments and the speed with which it can respond to new threats and opportunities.

This essay will explore these factors, and others, later. For now it is enough to note that they exert enormous influences on strategic planning and on the implementation of plans in war. By probing the full dimensions of those influences, this book will attempt to illuminate how they affect the *process* of strategy.

These essays originated at the U.S. Naval War College during the academic year 1985–86, when a number of the contributors met formally and informally to discuss strategy and policy.³ The participants discerned a need for historical examination of the ways in which political and military leaders evolve and articulate strategies in response to external challenges. They felt that much of the existing literature focused on the influence of individual thinkers⁴ or dwelled exclusively on a single polity. Neither approach provided much insight into the various factors that have actually molded the strategies of rulers and states. Consequently, discussions turned increasingly toward the *making* of strategy as the element crucial to understanding the ultimate meaning of that elusive word. Moreover, by the nature of their work as historians (or, in some cases, as historically minded political scientists), they were acquainted in some depth with a number of specific national examples. Consequently, it seemed that a book that included case studies would allow for instructive comparisons, especially if it covered a wide range of historical periods and types of polity.

The resulting book focuses on the making of strategy at its highest level, a level that frequently ranges beyond the military high command. It deals with the use of military power in the pursuit of national interests, but its authors are as interested in periods of peace as in periods of war. It operates from the premise that even stunning operational success cannot overcome defective strategic policy. As a study of military effectiveness in the first half of the twentieth century concluded:

³ The authors of this essay are indebted to Eliot Cohen, Holger Herwig, Steven Ross, John Gooch, Alvin Bernstein, Stan Pratt, and the numerous visitors who came through Newport to lecture in the Strategy and Policy course at the Naval War College.

⁴ See in particular, two important volumes: Edward Meade Earle, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, 1943); and its revised and expanded successor, Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, 1986).

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No amount of operational virtuosity . . . redeemed fundamental flaws in political judgment. Whether policy shaped strategy or strategic imperatives drove policy was irrelevant. Miscalculations in both led to defeat, and any combination of politico-strategic error had disastrous results, even for some nations that ended the war as members of the victorious coalition. Even the effective mobilization of national will, manpower, industrial might, national wealth, and technological know-how did not save the belligerents from reaping the bitter fruit of severe mistakes [at this level]. This is because it is more important to make correct decisions at the political and strategic level than it is at the operational and tactical level. Mistakes in operations and tactics can be corrected, but political and strategic mistakes live forever.⁵

The main lines of a state's strategy are frequently easy to discern. But the process by which that strategy has evolved is often extremely complex, and the Mahanian notion that sound strategy might spring forth by the discovery and application of eternal principles falls short of reality. Strategic thinking does not occur in a vacuum, or deal in perfect solutions; politics, ideology, and geography shape peculiar national strategic cultures. Those cultures, in turn, may make it difficult for a state to evolve sensible and realistic approaches to the strategic problems that confront it.

One of the strangest aspects of the nineteenth and twentieth century strategic cultures of European states was the tendency of military men to dismiss the political dimension of strategy as something that got in the way of operational necessities. Sir Henry Wilson's contemptuous dismissal of British politicians as "frocks" typified turn-of-the-century military attitudes. But of all the Europeans, the Germans exhibited the strongest predisposition to regard politics as something that ended when the iron dice rolled.

There was, of course, considerable irony in this, for it had been the extraordinary political and strategic wisdom of Otto von Bismarck that had allowed the Prussian state to unify Germany with only minimal opposition from other European powers. Yet the senior military leaders of the new Reich failed to understand the complexities of Bismarck's diplomacy and strategy. Fascinated by their victories at Königgrätz, Sedan, and Metz, they championed operational requirements above everything else. Moltke put it bluntly: "[I]n the case of tactical victory, strategy submits."⁶ Ludendorff, for his part, saw no more than tactics. Questioned about the operational objective of his great "Michael" offensive in March 1918, he commented, "I object to the word 'operation.' We will punch a hole in [their line.] For the rest, we shall see."⁷ The German defeat in World War I did not modify this

⁵ Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, "Lessons of War," *The National Interest* (Winter 1988), which describes the main findings of a study that its authors edited: *Military Effectiveness*, 3 vols. (London, 1988).

⁶ Quoted in Hajo Holborn, "Moltke and Schlieffen: The Prussian-German School," in Earle, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy*, p. 180.

⁷ Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, *Mein Kriegstagebuch*, ed. by Eugen von Frauenholz

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obsession with the battlefield. Geyr von Schweppenburg, a leading panzer commander in World War II and the first military attaché to London in the 1930s, admitted to Liddell Hart in 1949 that he had never read Haushofer or Delbrück. Clausewitz, he said, struck the German officer corps as too abstract to require serious attention. Even the general staff regarded him merely as “a theoretician to be read by professors.”⁸

This dismissive attitude toward strategy proved disastrous for Germany in two world wars. But even when policymakers take strategic analysis seriously, their solutions can still fall well short of the mark. With the benefit of hindsight, of course, the correct course is usually easy to see: to recognize, for example, the flawed strategic visions with which the major powers confronted the outbreak of World War I. As the ensuing catastrophe made clear, something was terribly amiss. But when one views matters as they appeared through the lens of government and public opinion, and above all in the uncertain light of what was actually known at the time, it becomes harder to sort out reasonable from foolish courses of action. This process is not helped by the almost continual shift in currents of power and interest. It proved difficult enough for the United States to navigate in the relatively simple, bipolar world of the post-1945 era; earlier periods were far more complicated. Contrasting British strategic decision-making in the 1930s with that of the United States after World War II, Paul Kennedy has emphasized the “extraordinary *fluidity and multipolarity*” of the interwar period:

At the beginning of the 1930s, the Soviet Union was widely regarded as the greatest land enemy of the British Empire, while in naval terms the chief rivals were the United States and Japan; Italy was seen as an old friend, France was unduly assertive and difficult (but not hostile), and Germany was still prostrate. Five or eight years later Japan appeared as a distinct challenge to British interests in the Far East, Germany had fallen under Nazi rule and was assessed as “the greatest long-term danger,” and Italy had moved from friendship to enmity; whereas the United States was more unpredictable and isolationist than ever.⁹

The end of the Cold War has done much to restore this multipolar world. The great complexity of the new international arena has already begun to supplant the nuclear threat as a major world problem.

The nature of international politics has been the subject of debate among historians since the ancient Greeks. Thomas Hobbes stated the most extreme position when he termed it one of permanent conflict and maintained that so

(Munich, 1929), Vol. 2, pp. 322, 372n., quoted in Holger Herwig, “The Dynamics of Necessity: German Military Policy During the Great War,” in *Military Effectiveness*, Vol. 1, p. 99.

⁸ Leo Geyr von Schweppenburg to B.H. Liddell Hart, 3.8.49, in Liddell Hart Papers, 9/24/61, Kings College Library, London.

⁹ Paul Kennedy, “British Net Assessment and the Coming of the Second World War,” in Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, eds., *Calculations* (New York, 1992).

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long as “men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre.”¹⁰

Neither Thucydides nor Clausewitz would have gone so far; both perceived a much larger chasm between the rough-and-tumble of peacetime competition and the violent, blood-soaked reality of war. But Thucydides, whose writings greatly influenced Hobbes, also portrayed the core of international relations as the naked exercise of power. As his Athenians say to the Spartans in 432 B.C.:

We have done nothing extraordinary, nothing contrary to human nature in accepting an empire when it was offered to us and then in refusing to give it up. Three very powerful motives prevent us from doing so – security, honour, and self-interest. And we were not the first to act in this way. Far from it. It has always been a rule that the weak should be subject to the strong; and besides, we consider that we are worthy of our power. Up till the present moment you, too, used to think that we were, but now, after calculating your interest, you are beginning to talk in terms of right and wrong.¹¹

The international environment, then, is one in which struggle predominates. A variety of factors shape that struggle. Clausewitz classified them into three: “a remarkable trinity – composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.”¹² Although Clausewitz intended this trinity to describe the nature of armed conflict, it applies with equal relevance to the conduct of strategy in peace as well as war. The tension between ideology or religion on the one hand and rational calculations of power on the other, as well as the decisive role of chance, make accurate prediction an impossibility in the affairs of nations. Both internal and external pressures buffet policy-makers seeking to frame national strategies.

Understanding this environment of struggle is essential to the formulation of any sensible strategic policy. And history offers the indispensable key to

¹⁰ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 13, para. 62.

¹¹ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. and ed. by Rex Warner (Harmondsworth, UK, 1976), p. 80. The theme is repeated even more starkly in the Melian Dialogue: “Our opinion of the Gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule wherever one can. This is not a law that we made ourselves, nor were we the first to act upon it when it was made. We found it already in existence, and we shall leave it to exist for ever among those who come after. We are merely acting in accordance with it, and we know that you or anybody else with the same power as ours would be acting in precisely the same way.” See *ibid.*, pp. 404–5.

¹² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 89; Thucydides likewise emphasizes the dominant role of chance. The numerical determinists of the social sciences disagree. Trevor N. Dupuy, for example, comments that “While there is some influence of chance on the battlefield, it generally affects both sides equally, and military combat is as close to being deterministic as it is possible for any human activity to be.” See Dupuy, *Understanding War: History and Theory of Combat* (New York, 1987), p. xxv; we are indebted to Barry Watts for calling attention to this passage.

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that understanding. Thucydides justified his purpose in writing *The Peloponnesian War* by declaring that past events – human nature being what it is – “will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future.”¹³ Providing contemporary strategists with a general understanding of how the strategic policymaking process has worked in the past may help that process to work better in the present and future. But any such understanding will be far different from currently popular checklists of principles and overarching theories of international relations. Reality is far too subtle and complex to accommodate mere theory. At best, theory can provide a way of organizing the complexities of the real world for study. Clausewitz, who thought long and hard on the virtues and deficiencies of theory, concluded:

It is an analytical investigation leading to a close *acquaintance* with the subject; applied to experience – in our case, to military history – it leads to thorough *familiarity* with it. The closer it comes to that goal, the more it proceeds from the objective form of a science to the subjective form of a skill, the more effective it will prove in areas where the nature of the case admits no arbiter but talent. It will, in fact, become an active ingredient of talent. Theory will have fulfilled its main task when it is used to analyze the constituent elements of war, to distinguish precisely what at first sight seems fused, to explain in full the properties of the means employed and to show their probable effects, to define clearly the nature of the ends in view, and to illuminate all phases of warfare through a thorough critical inquiry. Theory then becomes a guide to anyone who wants to learn about war from books; it will light his way, ease his progress, train his judgment, and help him to avoid pitfalls.¹⁴

The purpose of this book is therefore not to impart doctrine, but to offer its readers an introduction to the wide variety of factors that influence the formulation and outcome of national strategies. Nothing can provide policy-makers with the right answers to the challenges that confront them. But history suggests the questions they should ask.

Understanding the strategic choices that faced past decision-makers requires a grasp of the circumstances, opinions, and assumptions with which all strategists contend. Some of these factors have a definite, objective existence – a nation’s geographical position, for example. Others, like ideology or the weight of past historical experience, are intangibles. A few, such as estimates of economic strength, occupy an intermediate position between the two. Some elements may be amenable to quantification, while others resist it. The interplay of factors specific to a given polity will govern the way in which it formulates strategy, so that the way modern-day Israel makes strategy, for example, differs markedly from the way that Bourbon France made it. Yet the strategy-making processes of different states do have substantial

¹³ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, p. 48.

¹⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 141.

similarities: we do not live in a universe where *all* the variables are independent. Consequently, while variables have different effects from one nation to the next and from one era to another, some of them recur with impressive regularity.

GEOGRAPHY

The size and location of a nation are crucial determinants of the way its policy-makers think about strategy. The importance of these two factors is overwhelmingly obvious, yet their influence can be subtle. In Israel, for example, the pressures of geography have been so overwhelming as to produce an obsession with security. By contrast, the United States was for most of its history so removed from major external threats that it could ignore, and even reject, most of the tenets of balance-of-power politics.

The location of the British Isles offers a convenient case through which to explore many of the ramifications of the geographical factor. The British are close enough to the European continent to participate fully in its economic and intellectual developments, but stand apart behind the shields of the North Sea and English Channel, which since 1066 have successfully barred invaders – although the bloodless 1688 invasion of William III forms a partial exception to the rule. Proximity to the continent made Britain's governments acutely conscious of the threat of invasion. That fear spurred, in part, the development of its navy; it also dictated its historic policy toward the Low Countries, a policy aimed since the days of Elizabeth I at keeping that region outside the control of any major power.

Britain's geographical position also encouraged development of the specious but attractive conception of a "British way in war," argued with great eloquence (and even greater bias) by Liddell Hart. The nub of his argument was that over the centuries Britain had been most successful when it had eschewed heavy land commitments on the continent in favor of a peripheral strategy that maximized the Royal Navy's ability to project power against the enemy's weak points.

Liddell-Hart was, of course, trying to avert a repeat of the 1914–1918 continental commitment that had cost over 700,000 military dead. But in so doing he ignored or distorted a number of vital facts. First, Britain had not in the past avoided continental commitments, as the ghosts of Marlborough and Wellington might have assured him. Second, the extent to which Britain *had* been able to limit its forces on the European mainland depended primarily upon whether it had major continental allies capable of maintaining pressure on the enemy. Third, the peripheral strategy owed much of its success to the exposed position of valuable enemy overseas colonies, which had given the Royal Navy easy targets and the Foreign Office powerful bargaining chips in negotiations. But fourth and most important, Germany, the major continental threat to Britain in the first half of the twentieth

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century, fit none of the conditions for a peripheral strategy. As Michael Howard has pointed out:

It was . . . precisely the failure of German power to find an outlet and its consequent concentration in Europe, its lack of any possessions overseas, that made it so particularly menacing to the sprawling British Empire in two world wars and which make so misleading all arguments about “traditional” British strategy drawn from earlier conflicts against the Spanish and French Empires, with all the colonial hostages they had offered to fortune and the Royal Navy.¹⁵

Even so, it is worth noting that Liddell Hart’s reaction against World War I fit within a larger national pattern of British antipathy to continental commitments. Jonathan Swift’s biting essay, *On the Conduct of the Allies*, had denounced Marlborough’s strategy as fiercely as Liddell Hart had attacked Haig’s.

If geography has exerted a dominant influence on threat-assessment and strategy, it can also shape critical doctrinal decisions. In the 1920s and 1930s, both British and American airmen articulated a pervasive, even dogmatic thesis that air power could gain decisive results independently of ground and naval forces.¹⁶ The Germans, by contrast, developed a substantially different approach. German airmen did not dismiss the idea of “strategic” bombing because of some misbegotten belief that air forces should be tied to the “coat-tails of the army.” Rather they, unlike their Anglo-American counterparts, had to contend with the real and constant threat of land invasion. American and British airmen could rhapsodize about leaping over battle lines and tearing the heart from the enemy’s society, but German airmen had to deal with such prosaic matters as the possibility of losing their airfields. Bombing factories and sowing terror in Prague, Warsaw, and Paris was all very well, but such exploits would avail little if the German army concurrently lost the Rhineland and Silesia. Luftwaffe planners recognized the value of “strategic” bombing, but they could not afford to view it as the only proper role for air power. For geographic reasons, German airmen *had* to think about supporting the ground war as well.¹⁷ For the British and Americans, by contrast, the loss of Belgium, the Netherlands, or even France would not preclude the possibility of fighting on.

Yet the influences – or constraints – of geography can place severe limits on the achievements of national strategic aims.¹⁸ Philip II of Spain clearly aimed at a hegemonic position in Europe; yet his far-flung domains exposed Spain and its possessions to pressures from so many sides that it often seemed

¹⁵ Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment* (London, 1972), p. 32.

¹⁶ For the mindset of American airmen, see Michael Mandelbaum, ed., *America’s Defense* (New York, 1989); and Williamson Murray, *Luftwaffe* (Baltimore, 1985), Appendix I.

¹⁷ Williamson Murray, “The Luftwaffe Before the Second World War: A Mission, A Strategy?” *Journal of Strategic Studies* (September 1981): pp. 261–70.

¹⁸ See Geoffrey Parker, “The Making of Strategy in Habsburg Spain: Philip II’s ‘bid for mastery’, 1556–1598,” in this volume.

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beleaguered. In the Mediterranean, the Ottoman Turks were a constant and powerful threat; in the north, the Dutch rebellion presented a persistent economic and ideological threat that the English delightedly exacerbated; and in the center, the French, despite their internal fractures, represented a latent rival. Finally, as Drake's voyage around the world was to demonstrate, the wealth of the Americas, on which so much of Spain's position in Europe depended, was vulnerable to attack. Admittedly, many of Philip's problems stemmed from his inability or unwillingness to make the diplomatic concessions that might reduce the number of his opponents, but the merest survey of a map (not to mention any knowledge of the realities of communications and travel in sixteenth century Europe) should suggest the severe limitations that geography exerted on Spain's strategic choices.

Finally, the size of a state is a central element in its strategic situation. Israel's compactness and lack of territorial depth have made an offensively oriented preemptive strategy almost imperative; conversely, Russia's sprawling expanse has made possible its historical strategy of trading space for time in a protracted defense. By the same token, doctrinal preferences based on one set of geographical circumstances can prove dangerous when extended arbitrarily into another. For example, interior lines and the relatively short distances and advanced transportation network of central and western Europe shaped the German operational approach to war. But when confronted by the vast steppes of the Soviet Union, that approach soon led to disaster, in part thanks to its cavalier attitude toward logistics. German planners never learned the healthy respect for distance that characterized the ambitious and highly sophisticated manner in which the Americans, for instance, projected and sustained power over great distances.¹⁹

But geography has an impact beyond that of mere physical distance. In their war against the rebellious American colonies, the British found it impossible to control the military forces they projected across the Atlantic. Admittedly the political preconceptions with which the British embarked on this war made it a dubious proposition almost from the outset. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that of Lord Germaine's approximately sixty-three letters of instruction to General Sir Henry Clinton during the period from 1778 to 1781, six took less than two months to arrive in North America, twelve took approximately two months, twenty-eight took two to three months, eleven took three to four months, four took four to five months, and two took five to seven months.²⁰ While the wonders of modern technology have removed some of the difficulties involved in communicating orders and projecting power, time and distance and weather still exercise enormous influence on the strategic options and capabilities of states.

¹⁹ See Martin van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 142–81; and Klaus Reinhardt, *Die Wende vor Moskau, Das Scheitern der Strategie Hitlers im Winter 1941/42* (Stuttgart, 1972).

²⁰ Piers Mackesy, *The War for America, 1775–1783* (London, 1975), p. 73.

History

Historical experience influences strategic choices almost as strongly as geography. If the small size and exposed location of Israel weighs heavily on the minds of its policymakers, so too do the memories of the diaspora and the Holocaust. While it is possible (though unlikely) that Israel's Arab neighbors never literally meant their threats to drive the Jews into the Mediterranean, to a nation born from the ashes of six million dead those threats carried more than rhetorical significance. Israeli insistence on holding the occupied territories and willingness to shoot first and ask questions later are manifestations of historical experience, however misguided they may seem to those who see policymakers as dispassionate "rational actors."

In a similar vein, the fate of the Czech people in the aftermath of the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620 (when the Habsburgs entirely destroyed the Czech national army) explains much about Czech behavior in the twentieth century. The victorious Habsburgs proceeded to "Germanize" the Bohemian and Moravian lands to the extent that it is difficult to speak of a national culture beyond that of the Czech villages until the mid-nineteenth century. That memory shaped the behavior of Czech national leadership in September 1938, February 1948, and August 1968: better to surrender than risk national extinction. History has been kinder to others. Even Poland's cruel past never led to anything so catastrophic as the fate of the Czechs after 1620. Perhaps in consequence, the Poles have displayed a willingness to stand up against the greatest odds.²¹

If the lessons of history can be read, they can also be misread, as the Germans demonstrated in two world wars. The unification of Germany was primarily a result of the political astuteness and careful balancing of Bismarck. But neither Wilhelm II nor his generals appreciated or studied the deft statecraft involved. Both concentrated instead on the martial component, a necessary but scarcely sufficient condition of Bismarck's success. The battlefield triumphs over Denmark, Austria, and France convinced them of the primacy of operational requirements over everything else. As a result, Germany fought the war of 1914–1918 with a lack of political sense that contributed heavily to its ultimate defeat. The Schlieffen Plan, which sought to achieve swift and decisive victory at the operational level, had the strategic effect of provoking British intervention. Its inflexibility was likewise the product of military preferences, and made inevitable a two-front war that Germany might conceivably have avoided: until the Germans mobilized, in lock-step conformity to the Schlieffen Plan, France had not yet committed itself to the support of Russia in what was, after all, a crisis initially confined to Central and Eastern Europe. And after war commenced, the German

²¹ For a comparison of strategic situations in 1938 and 1939, see Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–1939: The Path to Ruin* (Princeton, 1985). The Poles fought; the Czechs did not.