The operational level is one of the four levels of war or conflict identified in British Defence Doctrine: grand-strategic, military-strategic, operational and tactical. Sometimes referred to as the theatre level, the operational level is that ‘at which campaigns and major operations are planned, conducted and sustained to accomplish strategic objectives within theatres or areas of operations’.

The skilful orchestration of military resources and activities for this purpose is called operational art. The operational level is the vital link between tactics and strategy. As the Soviet theorist Aleksandr Svechin neatly put it, ‘Tactics make the steps from which operational leaps are assembled; strategy points out the path’. Without consideration of the operational level, it is easy to see the achievement of strategic success as merely the sum of tactical victories, and but a small step from there to believing that every successful battle fought leads to strategic success. But, in the words of Bernard Brodie, ‘War is a question not of winning battles, but of winning campaigns’.

Yet the British military only incorporated this ‘vital link’ into its doctrine in the 1980s, over half a century after the militaries of some other nations, notably the Soviet Union, did so. Why was this?
decision’. He subsequently defined grand tactics as ‘the organization and distribution of the fighting forces themselves in order to accomplish the grand strategic plan, or idea’, which is a long way from Jomini’s rather prosaic concept and comes close indeed to our definition of the operational level today. But Fuller’s understanding of this level, although partly shared by B. H. Liddell Hart, was not developed further by other British military thinkers into the practical functions that would give it substance and thus define operational art. This was a significant factor in the absence of operational art in the mainstream of British military doctrine for over half a century.

There were a number of reasons for this. First, despite the title of Fuller’s book referred to earlier, there was, within the British military, little tradition of the study of war as a science. In part, this was due to an anti-intellectual ethos in the British Army. Officers were expected to indulge in gentlemanly outdoor pursuits such as hunting and sports, those who chose to read were in danger of being stigmatized as ‘bookish’ or, worse, ‘clever’. There was little appetite for theory, and a general mistrust of doctrine as an unwelcome constraint on a commander’s initiative and freedom of action. Even at the Staff College, although there was reference to what was called ‘the science of war’ – Henderson published a book under this title – as Jay Luvaas has pointed out, ‘the method they used was historical rather than scientific’. Fuller certainly brought a scientific approach to the Staff College during his time as chief instructor there from 1923 to 1925, and with it an encouragement of innovative thinking and an emphasis on military education – ‘how to think’ rather than ‘what to think’ – but the momentum for these changes was lost with his departure. The unscientific approach of the military was a favourite theme not only of Fuller but also of Liddell Hart. ‘The soldier’, wrote Liddell Hart, ‘has never been taught to approach his problem in a scientific spirit. His early training is directed, above all, to the cultivation of loyalties...The attitude of uncritical loyalty may be essential toward the winning of the war, but it is a fatally blind attitude in which to prepare for a war...[what is needed is] a change of thought towards criticism and independence of thought.”

A related reason was the general lack of encouragement for those serving members of the Armed Forces who were also military thinkers to get into print, although not all of the most senior officers went as far as Lord Cavan, Chief of the Imperial General Staff from 1922 to 1926, who ‘considered it improper for serving officers to publish books on military subjects’. Additionally, Fuller and Liddell Hart’s abrasive and dogmatic style, and bitterly critical tone, did little to endear them to the military establishment or to attract establishment support for the development of their ideas – which, of course, says as much about the military establishment at the time as it does about Fuller and Liddell Hart. In any case, the main subjects for contemporary military debate did not concern abstract concepts such as levels of warfare, but the practical and emotive issues of mechanization, the demands of Imperial Defence and restructuring in a time of financial stringency.

These factors were reinforced as Britain approached and entered the Second World War. The main challenges facing the military were those of the rapid expansion, training and equipping of the Armed Forces, with the doctrinal focus at teaching establishments, such as the Staff College, remaining where it had always been: at the tactical level. This did not preclude consideration of strategy, but the very compartmentalization of warfare into strategy and tactics served to obscure the level that lay between and linked them. Additionally, between the wars the British Army had been busily involved in ‘real soldiering’ – imperial policing, which resulted in expertise in imperial policing, but allowed little time, and gave little cause for, developing skills in, or thinking about, large-scale operations. Nor was the eve of war the best time to be contemplating radical changes in doctrinal approaches, particularly in the circumstances of a rapidly expanding Army where the overriding training principle had to be simplicity. Furthermore, the ability of the Army to manoeuvre was greatly constrained by the small amount of mechanization and armour. True, the proportion of the Army that was mechanized was higher than in any other European army, but by the same token the British Army was small. Moreover, British doctrinal perception of the battlefield was relatively linear and shallow; although exploitation of breakthrough was considered, deep operations – a main expression of operational art – featured little, if at all. For the British military tended to think in terms of achieving success by pushing back the enemy front line, thereby gaining ground. By contrast, the German goal was not ground-oriented, but enemy-oriented: annihilation (vernichtung), enabled by manoeuvre – a goal requiring creative thinking, even if in practice this rarely rose above the tactical level. Of even greater contrast was the Soviet goal: operational-level catastrophic shock (uder) to the enemy system – the result of operational art. Finally, there was also the command style of the British grand-strategic leader: Churchill. Churchill played a very direct role not only in the formulation and implementation of strategy, but also in tactical direction, at least in those theatres in which he, personally, was particularly interested. Here he saw little requirement for his tactical commanders to do anything other than fight and win the battles that he, Churchill, had directed – and to do so quickly, whether or not they believed themselves to be ready. In these circumstances, freedom of action at theatre level would not have seemed to him to be either necessary or desirable. Tactical successes would lead inexorably to strategic success – as it happens, a view shared by Hitler. A level between the tactical and the strategic was superfluous.

What is more surprising, perhaps, is that such a level did not feature in British military doctrine for almost forty years after the war. An important factor here is the triangular and symbiotic relationship between the operational level, the manoeuvre/attrition balance in approaches to warfare and command styles. Freedom of action at the
operational level allows for the expression of operational art, a major medium for which is manoeuvre, both physical manoeuvre and mental (or psychological) manoeuvre, in the sense of mentally out-manoeuvring your opponent. An attritional approach focuses on the defeat of the enemy by destruction of his forces; a manoeuvrist approach, however, sees the enemy’s forces as but one part of his ‘system’, and looks for the most cost-effective means of defeating that system, which may or may not involve the destruction of his forces. The manoeuvrist approach steers you towards fighting only when to do so is necessary for achievement of your campaign goals. Successful manoeuvre, however, requires a command system which is not based on command by detailed orders, but on one which allows opportunities to be exploited faster than the enemy can react. 17 During the Second World War, with exceptions – notably, Slim’s campaign in Burma – neither manoeuvre (whether physical or mental) nor command by anything other than detailed orders were strong suits for the British Army. Indeed, the British Army’s success was perceived by many to have been due to the adherence of commanders such as Montgomery to the principles of largely static, attritional battles and a tight, centralized command system. Montgomery’s predecessors in the Western Desert were perceived as having dabbled with manoeuvre and a slack command chain – in retrospect, due to a superficial understanding of some very immature concepts originating from Fuller and Liddell Hart – a potentially disastrous situation redeemed, it was perceived, only by a return to the ‘teed-up’, ‘tidy’, tightly-controlled battlefield advocated by Montgomery.18 And, in Montgomery’s defence, it is fair to say that he identified the strengths of the British Army in this matter, and played to them. He may also have drawn the conclusion that where he deviated from this – for example, in trying his hand at deep operations at Arnhem – abject failure had resulted. Furthermore, it was significant that the new Chief of the Imperial General Staff, appointed in 1946, was Montgomery himself; his influence over the mythology of the war, the lessons-learnt process, the subsequent development of doctrine and the appointment of his acolytes was immense – effects that greatly outlived his tenure of office. The doctrine of the British Army thus remained focused at the tactical level (how to fight battles), attritional in approach and with a tight, centralized command-system.

**As a platoon commander in what was called the Main Defensive Position, the role of my battalion was to die gloriously**

There was a further, increasingly significant factor which focused attention away from the operational level. The British Army’s primary post-War role was as a garrison in Germany – the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) – facing the threat of an invasion by Soviet-led forces of the Warsaw Pact. The strategy was one of ‘Forward Defence’. NATO nations were to deploy to the eastern boundaries of West Germany and fight shoulder-to-shoulder, with those governments which possessed nuclear weapons resorting to them if NATO’s conventional forces were overwhelmed. The tactics were to hold ground; it was largely a positional battle of attrition. As a platoon commander in what was called the Main Defensive Position, the role of my battalion was to die gloriously. The operational level played little or no part in forward defence. And such was the emphasis in the Army as a whole on BAOR that the Army not only trained primarily, at times it seemed almost exclusively, for BAOR operations – how to fight at the tactical level – but equipped itself largely for this single role. It chose its tanks and armoured vehicles not primarily for their ability to manoeuvre, but on the basis of their perceived performance in a largely static, defensive slogging-match. The more it did so, the less capable it became of manoeuvring even if it had wanted to. And for an army that saw its greatest strength as its regimental system, it has to be said that many of its members, including very senior ones, felt comfortable focusing on the minutiae of the tactical level and commanding formations (up to, and including army group) as if they were large regiments. Lastly, winners in war tend to become victims of their own success; victory does not so much provoke change as appear to excuse it. It might have been expected that research or interest in academia might have led to wider examination of this subject, particularly with the advent of war studies departments in universities. But for at least two decades after the war, their attention was primarily on more obviously ‘relevant’ issues, such as strategy in the nuclear age, or on softer issues such as the Armed Forces and society. That does not, of course, mean to say that the subject of the operational level was being ignored in this country. There were a number of individuals who were studying Soviet military doctrine at British universities, notably John Erickson at Edinburgh, and a group of academics at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. In 1971 this group, led by Chris Donnelly, was formalized into the Government-sponsored Soviet Studies Research Centre using open-source material, of which there was a surprisingly large amount.19 Increasingly authoritative articles appeared, such as that in 1971 on the Soviet desant capability20 and in 1975 on the Soviet concept of operations.21 Focus on the threat to NATO’s central front posed by Soviet Operational (level) Manoeuvre Groups raised awareness of the operational level itself.

This coincided with post-Vietnam doctrinal reappraisals in the United States. Following the publication of the US Army’s new doctrine in 1976,22 some civilian commentators, notably William Lind, published articles highly critical of the perceived limitations of the doctrine: its emphasis on firepower and attrition at the expense of manoeuvre; its ‘industrial approach’ to warfare which relied on materiel superiority; the narrow focus at the tactical level; and the lack of emphasis on creativity and originality. The ensuing debate was highly influential in the production of a
revised doctrine, one which acknowledged the existence and importance of the operational level. It is not the purpose of this article to examine that evolution, apart from noting a number of significant features. The debate, at times heated, included participation from both the civilian and military communities — academics, journalists and politicians as well as retired and serving officers — and took place not only in professional journals but also in public newspapers and magazines. Serving members of the Armed Forces were not discouraged from participating, or at least were not deterred from doing so, and significant contributions came from the military-academic community. Schools of thought emerged which advanced the level of understanding; the debate moved forward. The leader of the Army’s Training and Doctrine Command, General Donn Starry, played a prominent role in steering this debate, and in adopting a systemic resolution to it. The result was a new doctrine in 1982, entitled ‘Air Land Battle’ which centred on the operational level, and the establishment of an operational-level course, the School for Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) at Fort Leavenworth.

This evolution was undoubtedly influenced by the Soviet Studies Research Centre in the United Kingdom, Shimon Naveh, in his authoritative study, In Pursuit of Military Excellence, assesses that the Group ‘exercised great impact on the perception of Soviet operational theory held by the American school of reformers. Being far ahead of their American studies in the study of Soviet deep operations, the British analysts managed to illuminate essential issues...and managed to translate the abstract principles of the Deep Operations theory into operational scenarios understood by the military planner’. But this lead in research and analysis was not readily translated into doctrinal change in the British military. This was partly due to the fact that the Group was independent of and separate from the official doctrinal department, but also because doctrinal development in the British Army at the time was sluggish, and there was no active senior patron to drive through change. Moreover, participation in even semi-public debate on any subject that could possibly, by the widest stretch of the imagination, be construed as contentious was greatly discouraged by the Ministry of Defence, and this extended to publication of books and articles. Among the unintended consequences of this was a stifling of the dialectical debate which could have resulted, and thus of the advancement of military science.

There was, however, one contemporary British theorist who had not only recognized the operational level for what it was, but developed the mechanics of operational art. Richard Simpkin, a retired brigadier, had made a lifetime study of Soviet military theory and applied the mind of a polymath to the future of warfare. His book, Race to the Swift: Thoughts on Warfare in the Twenty-First Century, published in 1985, a major work of military philosophy, gave substance to operational art by articulating key operational concepts – such as centre of gravity, simultaneity, tempo and manoeuvre – and by entwining the operational level with the manoeuvrist approach and a decentralized command system. Simpkin was highly influential with like-minded theorists, mostly international, but less than he deserved to be in British military circles. Like Fuller, he was not helped by his sometimes abstruse prose, nor by the fact that he was a self-styled heretic who enjoyed baiting the military establishment. Simpkin’s view that ‘The peacetime military establishment of most advanced countries enjoys an unrivalled and largely deserved reputation for blinkered thinking’ was all the more irritating for being uncomfortably close to the truth. He was, therefore, an outsider, and not an influential patron for doctrinal change.

Such patronage, however, was not far off. As Commander of the 1st British Corps in Germany in 1981–83, Lieutenant General Sir Nigel Bagnall had been openly critical not only of the lack of manoeuvre and of the centralized command system inherent in the Central Front doctrine, but what he saw as over-literal interpretation of the strategy of Forward Defence itself. Not only was Bagnall a friend of Simpkin and aware of the doctrinal debate in the United States, but he had also established a close professional and personal relationship with a number of senior German officers, serving and retired, who shared his interest in conceptual and doctrinal development. As Commander of NATO’s Northern Army Group 1983–85, he advocated focus on the operational level and instituted a General Deployment Plan based on manoeuvre at army group level, rather than one based on a series of corps battles, fought largely in isolation. When he became Chief of the General Staff in 1985 he personally instituted an Army-wide doctrine, centring on the need for manoeuvre and for decentralized command and control, and established at the Army Staff College at Camberley in 1988 an equivalent to the SAMS course – the Higher Command and Staff Course (HCSC) – which focused on the operational level. The British doctrine establishment had no operational-level expertise, so what was taught on HCSC was internally produced at the Staff College, drawing heavily on US establishments, notably SAMS, and influenced by authors such as William Lind and Robert Leonhard in the US, as well as by Simpkin. Also in 1988, the Staff College adopted what became known as the Manoeuvrist Approach to operations – one that aims to shatter the enemy’s cohesion and will to fight, rather than eroding his forces and material – and a decentralized command ethos, Mission Command, which was the antithesis of command by detailed orders. From that time, HCSC graduates, officers (from all three Services) trained in operational art, were to be found in operational-level appointments in the equivalent ranks of colonel and brigadier. Importantly, with their participation on the HCSC, all three Services had ‘bought into’ the concept of the operational level, and by 1995 all three had incorporated it into their doctrine, although it was not until the publication of a joint British Defence Doctrine in 1996, and the establishment of a Permanent Joint Headquarters in the same year and of
the Joint Services Command and Staff College a year later, that significant numbers of middle-ranking officers were trained in, and practising, operational art. It could therefore be said that operational art had become institutionalized in the British Armed Forces. The coincidence around 1990 of recognition of the operational level with the demise of the Warsaw Pact caused some to question the relevance of operational art in a perceived age of smaller-scale operations. This misses the point, but helps to illuminate it; operational art is defined not by scale, but by an activity: the linking of military-strategic objectives with tactical-level actions. Certainly, the greater the complexity of the campaign, the greater the demands on operational art; and a facet of these new operations is their complexity. Such operations also tend to highlight the shifting overlap that always exists in practice between the various levels, the constantly evolving nature of operational art, and the fact that the operational level is not tied to a particular level of command or even to location. The operational level is determined by where operational art is practised: in the past, it has most often been carried out ‘in-theatre’, but it need not be, and is not always so. In the United Kingdom, for example, it is most often carried out at the Permanent Joint Headquarters outside London. This proximity might tempt policy-makers and strategists to bypass the operational level, a temptation they would be wise to resist.

**The operational level is determined by where operational art is practised: in the past, it has most often been carried out ‘in-theatre’**

**Conclusions**

A number of conclusions offer themselves from this brief study: firstly, those concerning the consequences of the absence of the operational level from British military doctrine. The resulting doctrinal focus on the tactical level led, for better or for worse, to a focus on the conduct of battles. It contributed to a Single Service rather than Joint Service focus, to an attritional tendency in the attrition/manoeuvre balance, to a pedagogic approach of ‘what to think’ rather than ‘how to think’, and to an emphasis on the personal qualities perceived by the military to be important at the tactical level, such as obedience, loyalty, conformity and discipline, often at the expense of qualities more valuable at the operational level, such as intellect, independent-mindedness, scepticism and creativity. It led some people towards the false logic that every tactical victory would lead to strategic success, and that, therefore, every opportunity to destroy the enemy should automatically be taken – what today might be termed the kinetic solution. And it led to a tendency for senior officers to be thinking small when they should have been thinking big.

**The resulting doctrinal focus on the tactical level led, for better or for worse, to a focus on the conduct of battles**

Lastly, there are some conclusions that the British military might draw about itself: in particular, the difficulty of conceptual and doctrinal development in an instinctively conservative and hierarchical organization. For as Sir Michael Howard has pointed out, ‘The disciplined acceptance of traditional values and traditional solutions is the natural product of the military environment, and the problem of combining this attitude with the scientist’s scepticism and agnosticism lies at the root of military education and military training at every level.’ Those at the top of such hierarchies need to be tolerant of heretics and of criticism, and need actively to stimulate and encourage participation in professional debate, if they are not to be seen to be disapproving of it, and thereby stifling it. There is an important role to be played in such a debate from outside the Armed Services and the Ministry of Defence, and it behoves the military to ensure that it communicates externally to a sufficient degree to allow such a contribution to be well informed. Finally, the slow evolution of operational art in the United Kingdom would undoubtedly have been accelerated had the British military as an institution been more receptive to the idea of progress through military science, as opposed to reliance on an essentially empirical approach. There is certainly indication of change in this respect over the past couple of decades – change linked, in part, to the study of the operational level itself and a change which, with the establishment of the Defence Academy and its academic partnerships, should now be institutionalized. Yet we should, nevertheless, be aware of our heritage of reliance on the purely empirical approach – and beware of its return, particularly in an era when, for members of the Armed Forces, the evolving nature of conflict has seldom made greater calls on military education, but the time available for it has never seemed to be less.

**NOTES**

1. British Military Doctrine 0-01 (MOD, 2001) and UK Glossary of Joint and Multinational Terms and Definitions (JWP 0-01.1).
7. ‘Grand tactics is the art of posting troops upon the battle field according to the accidents of the ground, of bringing them into action, and the art of fighting upon the ground, in contradistinction to planning upon a map.’ Baron Jomini, The Art of War. (London: Greenhill Books, 1996), p.69. According to Holden Reid, Jomini’s influence on Fuller was ‘negligible’, op cit, p.66.
8. For examples of such functions, see Glantz, op cit, pp. 10-11.
9. Contrary to the views of some. For example, Christopher Bellamy, The Evolution of Modern
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