

Military Arts Paper.

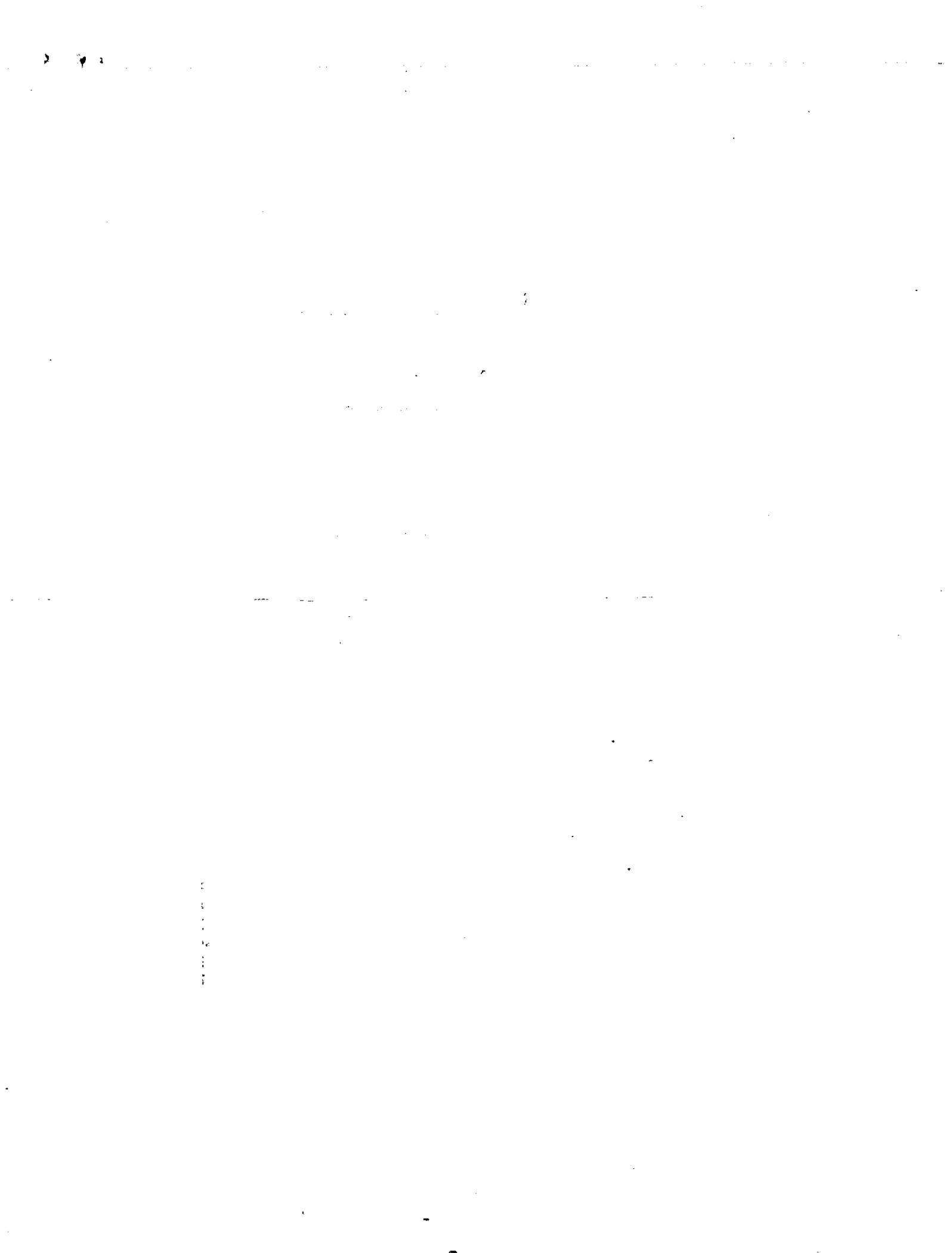
THE COMBAT IMPERATIVES IN THE DEVELOPMENT  
OF GERMAN OFFENSIVE DOCTRINE IN WORLD WAR I

CPT Lars Lavine

Roster #079

IOAC 2-86

Clarity Index - 26



This paper will show how the new German doctrine was developed using the seven combat imperatives. This is useful to our army and leadership today because it is an example of how, in any given tactical situation, a plan or doctrine can be developed to solve a stalemate. This is exactly what the Germans faced. Because of technological advances, the old way of fighting wars had become obsolete. During the years 1914 through 1917, a position type of warfare had evolved. In this type of warfare, the envelopment had become difficult, if not impossible, to execute.

On 11 November, 1917, the German Army High Command decided that the great offensive would begin in the Spring of 1918. Between this decision and the initiation of the offensive on 21 March, 1918, the German army developed the appropriate doctrine and prepared as many units as possible for the attack.<sup>1</sup>

The successful tactician depends on proven techniques and on troops who are well versed in employing them. Standardized practices actually enhance flexibility; but they must be more than just a series of routine approaches to solving types of operational problems. As he plans and fights the battle, the tactician must understand the seven imperatives of combat:

1. Insure unity of effort.
2. Direct friendly strengths against enemy weaknesses.
3. Designate and sustain the main effort.
4. Sustain the fight.
5. Move fast, strike hard, and finish rapidly.
6. Use terrain and weather.
7. Protect the troops.<sup>2</sup>

The Germans understood that the offensive was the only way to win the war. The war on the Eastern front was coming to an end with the Russians suing for peace. Now, the assets devoted to the Eastern front could be shifted to the West for

the Spring offensive.

Reliance on massive firepower to destroy the enemy was clearly not the solution. In any event, the Germans could not match the allied expenditure of munitions, so a different offensive technique was required. A French captain (Captain Andre Laffargue) inadvertently provided an important source of inspiration for developing such new techniques.<sup>3</sup>

This captain published a pamphlet entitled The Attack in Trench Warfare, which happened to fall into German hands. It is from this pamphlet that the Germans found inspiration to develop their own doctrine. On 1 January, 1918, the German Army High Command published The Attack in Position Warfare, which became the basic document for the German offensive of 1918.<sup>4</sup> This doctrine later came to be called "Infiltration" tactics by the allies.

The first combat imperative, unity of effort, basically means that all individuals, soldiers, leaders, and assets are being used to accomplish the same goal.

The German effort emphasized the coordination of all arms, especially infantry and artillery; just as no personality was the source of tactical wisdom, there was no one weapon or technique that exclusively carried the German attacks. Like the efforts of the officers in developing doctrine, the efforts of the various arms blended in a complementary fashion.<sup>5</sup>

Now that the Germans did not have to be concerned with a war on the Eastern front, they could direct all available assets toward an offense in the West. In addition, the Germans learned a great many lessons on employing those assets in a unified effort, especially regarding artillery. Besides there being a unity of effort regarding assets and equipment,

the new doctrine stressed a cohesion between the soldiers. Captain Andre Laffargue, in his pamphlet, The Attack in Trench Warfare, states,

In order that an organization may be capable of reaching the enemy, it is necessary for each man to be thoroughly convinced that his neighbor will march at his side and not abandon him; he should not have to turn around to see whether his comrade is coming. This requires a solidly established cohesion. Cohesion is very difficult to obtain with the continual renewal of men and non-commissioned officers; to cement it well, the men must have lived long together and have borne the same hardships during which are strengthened the sentiments of solidarity and affection which create in the company invisible bonds, stronger than all discipline, and the only ones capable of resisting the fierce egoism of the battlefield.<sup>6</sup>

Only through this close unity within the unit can a unit hope to achieve a unity of effort.

The next combat imperative that must be addressed is the need to direct friendly strengths against enemy weaknesses. The position type warfare that prevailed between 1914 and 1917 merely had large scale offensives being conducted on broad fronts with no consideration toward enemy weak points.

In the new German doctrine, the Army High Command addressed this issue. An English analysis of the German doctrine, entitled German Infantry in Action, points out, "As the foremost troops of the company approach the enemy, platoon commanders must decide where to attack. Where weak points in the enemy position become apparent, the attack will be pressed home."<sup>7</sup> The Germans would determine through intelligence and reconnaissance where the enemy was weak on a larger scale. It was the responsibility of the smaller unit leaders to

pinpoint and exploit those weaknesses on the ground. In addition, Lieutenant Colonel Pascal Lucas in his book, The Evolution of Tactical Ideas in France and Germany, reinforces this point.

In order to take advantage of favorable opportunities without delay, stubborn assaults are not to be made against strong points; but, on the contrary, as deep penetrations as possible are to be made into the zones of least resistance....<sup>8</sup>

The Germans were looking for deep penetrations in specific locations, rather than forcing the enemy back on a broad front. These specific locations were enemy weak points where the Germans would concentrate their efforts so as to gain the greatest successes.

The third combat imperative states that one must designate and sustain the main effort. The German doctrine clearly addresses this subject.

The Attack in Position Warfare noted that the strategic breakthrough was the ultimate goal of the penetration. In order to achieve that goal the attack had to strike deeply into the enemy position. Acknowledging the impossibility of destroying all enemy fires in such a deep penetration, the German tactical doctrine did not require complete destruction. Instead, disruption of enemy units and communications was essential. Throughout the doctrine, keeping the enemy off balance, pressing the attack continuously and retaining the initiative received great emphasis.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, in German Infantry in Action, the authors state,

If the first assault is successful, even if penetration is only made on a narrow front, the attack must be pressed forward into the depth of the enemy position. At this moment the personal example of the platoon commander, who must concentrate on maintaining the momentum of the attack, is of great importance. Immediate pursuit at places where the enemy resistance weakens is, therefore, required.<sup>10</sup>

From these two accounts of the new doctrine, it is apparent that the Germans placed great emphasis on this third combat imperative. In fact, one can argue that the German doctrine stresses this combat imperative more than any other.

The next combat imperative is to sustain the fight. This combat imperative is very closely related to the last one in that, if an army does not sustain the fight with logistics, sustaining the main effort might come to a halt. In regard to the replenishment of ammunition, Captain Andre Laffargue states, "Timely replenishment of ammunition is essential. Infantry support weapons placed under command control their own ammunition supply. The commander of the rifle company must therefore be informed of their expenditure in ammunition."<sup>11</sup>

In addition to ammunition, general supplies to sustain the fight must also be planned for. One often forgets that besides materiel needed to sustain the fight, one must also plan for reinforcements in manpower. In the attack, a lack of personnel for the fight will put a halt to that attack more quickly than a lack of supplies. In The Attack in Position Warfare, the doctrine outlines, "The reinforcements were kept well forward, but under the control of higher headquarters they would reinforce success."<sup>12</sup> The Germans understood that both those materiel and manpower assets would be essential in sustaining the fight.

Finally, one cannot overlook that in an attack, smaller objectives must be taken to achieve the overall objective.

In most cases, a successful attack will not be one long, continuous ordeal. So, when these smaller objectives are seized, that is the time to prepare for the continuation of the attack. In other words, the fight must be sustained. "The capture of the objective must be reported immediately. Reorganization in depth must take place for the continuation of the attack, or for holding the ground gained."<sup>13</sup> From this, one can deduce that the German doctrine obviously took into account the need for a proper reorganization to sustain the fight.

The fifth combat imperative is to move fast, strike hard, and finish rapidly. If designating and sustaining the main effort was not the German doctrine's most stressed combat imperative, then this fifth one was. The infiltration tactics were based upon the fifth combat imperative. At the time, all attacks on both sides were preceded by an artillery barrage. The case so far had been to start the barrage a couple of days in advance and have it last up until the actual assault. The new German doctrine differed from this in hoping to strike fast.

The Germans wanted to avoid a prolonged artillery fire, for surprise would be lost, and an artillery duel would develop in which the allies, with greater amounts of ammunition, would eventually prevail. Therefore, German fire had to be fast and accurate.<sup>14</sup> With this artillery barrage being short (three to five hours) and concentrated, they were able to have their forces strike fast. It also simply made for an accelerated

timetable that helped to achieve surprise and left less time for the enemy  
A to react.

At 0440 on 21 March, 1918, the artillery preparation began. Nearly 6000 guns commenced firing in a seven-phase bombardment plan designed by Colonel Bruchmuller. The elaborately planned bombardment lasted 5 hours and then the infantry assaulted. The concentration of fire in those 5 hours was terrific.<sup>15</sup>

This account as related from Wilhelm Balck's book, Development of Tactics, clearly relates that the new doctrine stressed moving fast and striking hard.

This type of attack required a new type of unit with new techniques in order to be able to strike hard and finish rapidly. Timothy Lupfer states,

The storm unit techniques and the new offensive doctrine emphasized a constant drive forward. Speed and timing were essential for rapid advance and small unit initiative was crucial to seize the unpredictable and fleeting opportunities of the battlefield. There was no "secret formula" in these techniques. Enemy positions were reduced in a practical fashion: the physical and psychological effects of the advance reinforced each other.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, Captain Laffargue states, "It is absolutely necessary to keep pushing on in a brutal preconceived and almost unintelligent manner until the last link is broken; otherwise, hostile reinforcements will suddenly arrive and shatter the supreme effort."<sup>17</sup> Essentially, he was saying that one must finish rapidly to achieve the objective and this the Germans read and were able to emphasize in their own doctrine.

The sixth combat imperative is to use terrain and weather. This is basically two different subjects, so

terrain will be discussed first. Once again, Captain Laffargue brings up an important point when he highlights the need for proper use of terrain in the attack.

Before the attack, the physiognomy of the terrain and of the enemy defense should be well impressed on the memory. The position should be known not only to the front but in profile. This study is of the greatest importance particularly for the troops of the second line because the greatest cause for stoppage in an offensive against a fortified position is the incomplete knowledge of the position.<sup>18</sup>

Taking from Captain Laffargue, the German doctrine emphasizes the need for using terrain on the way up to the objective to achieve surprise. It also stressed that one must use (meaning know) the terrain on and past the objective in order to exploit successes. Down at a lower level, the authors of German Infantry in Action point out, "Section commanders lead their sections as near as possible to the enemy without opening fire, making skillful use of the ground and the areas not covered by fire...."<sup>19</sup> So, from this, one can see that the German doctrine emphasized the use of terrain in the attack, where the older doctrine of the broad attack did not use terrain well.

Regarding the use of weather, this is an area that the German doctrine did not always exploit. At times, German offensives in 1918 were conducted under adverse weather conditions. At the same time, they also tried their offensives in better weather and were not as successful. Liddell Hart points this out in his memoirs, The Future of Infantry.

"Fog had cloaked all three breakthroughs by the Germans in

1918, but was absent in their three offensives of March 25, June 9, and July 15."<sup>20</sup> So, this is one area that the Germans were aware of but did not specifically address in their new doctrine. They did try to use the night hours to their advantage.

The last combat imperative is to protect the force. This is not necessarily a new concept in German doctrine, but it is an area which was addressed. The company, when deployed in close country, protects itself by means of moving or standing patrols.<sup>21</sup> The Germans had always used patrols to protect its forces, but in developing the new doctrine, the Germans tried to achieve surprise. Patrolling was very important in protecting the force from being destroyed by the enemy and to protect it from enemy intelligence.

Another way that the Germans planned to protect their forces under the new doctrine was the way the force was organized and how the attack was carried out.

To conduct the attack, the German Infantry organized in depth. Speed and depth were the means of securing their flanks and rear: speed to keep the enemy from reacting in time to the attack, and depth to provide the follow-up units which would isolate the bypassed pockets of resistance and prevent these remnants from interfering with the continuation of the attack.<sup>22</sup>

By maintaining depth in their formations, the Germans would not compromise their entire unit. Once again, speed provided security because it offered very little time for the enemy to react.

One can see that the Germans, in formulating their new



[REDACTED]

END NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Timothy T. Lupfer, The Dynamics of Doctrine: The Changes in German Tactical Doctrine During the First World War (Ft. Leavenworth, 1981), p. 37.

<sup>2</sup>Headquarters, Department of the Army, Field Manual 100-5: Operations (Washington, D. C., 1982), p. 2-6.

<sup>3</sup>Lupfer, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup>Lupfer, p. 41.

<sup>5</sup>Lupfer, pp. 42 - 43.

<sup>6</sup>Andre Laffargue, The Attack in Trench Warfare, translated for Infantry Journal (Washington, D. C., 1916), p. 31.

<sup>7</sup>General Staff, The War Office, German Infantry in Action (Ottawa, 1941), p. 17.

<sup>8</sup>Pascal Lucas, The Evolution of Tactical Ideas in France and Germany during the War of 1914 - 1918 (Paris, 1923), trans. P. V. Kieffer (Ft. Leavenworth, 1925), p. 235.

<sup>9</sup>Lupfer, p. 41.

<sup>10</sup>General Staff, The War Office, pp. 17-18.

<sup>11</sup>General Staff, The War Office, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup>Lupfer, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup>General Staff, The War Office, p. 18.

<sup>14</sup>Lupfer, p. 44.

<sup>15</sup>Lupfer, p. 49.

<sup>16</sup>Lupfer, p. 44.

<sup>17</sup>Laffargue, p. 23.

<sup>18</sup>Laffargue, p. 37.

<sup>19</sup>General Staff, The War Office, p. 17.

<sup>20</sup>John A. English, On Infantry (New York, 1981), p. 38.

<sup>21</sup>General Staff, The War Office, p. 13.

<sup>22</sup>Lupfer, p. 42.

<sup>23</sup>Lupfer, p. 37.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Balck, Wilhelm. Development of Tactics--World War. Translated by Harry Bell. Fort Leavenworth: General Service Schools Press, 1922.
- English, John. On Infantry. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1981.
- General Staff, The War Office. German Infantry in Action. Ottawa: Edmond Cloutier, Printer to the King's Most Excellent Majesty, 1941.
- Headquarters, Department of the Army. Field Manual 100-5: Operations. Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1982.
- Laffargue, Andre. The Attack in Trench Warfare. Translated for Infantry Journal. Washington, D. C.: The United States Infantry Association, 1916.
- Lucas, Pascal. The Evolution of Tactical Ideas in France and Germany during the War of 1914 - 1918. Translated by P. V. Kieffer. Ft. Leavenworth, 1925. French publication, 1923.
- Lupfer, Timothy T. The Dynamics of Doctrine: The Changes in German Tactical Doctrine During the First World War. Ft. Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, 1981.