

## THE FRENCH CAMPAIGN OF 1940: A TRIUMPH OF OPERATIONAL DOCTRINE

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No event of World War II surprised or shocked contemporaries more than the sudden collapse of France in the summer of 1940. The quick German victory overturned strategic assumptions that had gone virtually unchallenged by the military establishments of the major powers for a quarter of a century. The belief in the virtual invulnerability of modern fortress systems, in the primacy of the defensive, in the battlefield dominance of artillery and perhaps most of all in the quantitative and qualitative superiority of a French Army which had almost universally been viewed for a generation as the world's finest military force had been totally shattered by the "lightning war" unleashed by the German Wehrmacht.<sup>1</sup>

Such a complete reversal of form and expectation had somehow to be explained. The first such explanations tended to concentrate on the awesome power of the Wehrmacht, on the thousands of modern tanks and aircraft with which the superbly prepared Germans had simply overwhelmed the French and British. Not surprisingly, this version of the fall of France successfully fostered by Goebbels' propaganda machine. German newsreels and military documentaries invariably showed the elite motorized and Panzer forces and featured prominently the powerful Mark III and Mark IV tanks. Seldom seen was the mass of the German Army slogging on foot with its nineteenth century horse drawn transport and artillery. Many allied analysts only learned after the war that the Germans had used large numbers of captured Czech tanks, or the thin-skinned and undergunned Mark II's and even Mark I training tanks, never designed for combat, to have even rough parity with the allies. If the Germany Army had achieved decisively superiority in 1940, it was certainly not in the number and quality of its armor.<sup>2</sup>

A second way of explaining the French defeat in 1940 was to blame the ineptitude, corruption and defeatism within France itself. A considerable literature of self-flagellation emerged during and after the war, blaming defeat either on the moral paralysis of the French Left caused by the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939, or on the lack of warlike ardor of the French Right which supposedly preferred Hitler to Leon Blum.<sup>3</sup> In addition, another series of books appeared which concentrated on the military failures of a French High Command dominated by superannuated generals, fixated by defensive-mindedness and the Maginot complex, and morally crippled by their memory of the huge casualties suffered by France in the First World War.<sup>4</sup>

While there are elements of truth in these explanations, this paper suggests that while the Allied and German forces were basically equal in the

number of men and equipment they put into the field and also basically equal in military technology, that is, in the quality of their machines and weapons systems, that the Germans possessed one decisive element of superiority which explains the one-sided outcome of the campaign. That element of superiority was their operational and tactical doctrine.

The term "operational" to describe a separate level of war between the strategic and tactical first occurs in Prussian-German military usage and dates from the period when the elder Moltke was Chief of the General Staff. The operational theory and doctrine we now associate with that German military thought developed from a number of different elements. Among them are: a theoretical basis drawn from the writings of Clausewitz; the geographical position of Prussia-Germany; the military impact of vastly improved roads, railroad transportation and telegraphic communications; the special advantages and disadvantages of that uniquely Prussian system of military organization, education and mobilization introduced during the great reform period early in the nineteenth century and critically modified by Roon and Bismarck in 1862; and finally the tactical and command imperatives created by improved weapons, specifically the breech-loading "needle-gun," and the breech-loading rifled cannon of vastly increased range and accuracy. All of these elements are inter-related and influenced operational thought. Nonetheless, it will be useful to examine each of them separately.

The dictum of Clausewitzian thought most directly relevant to German operational theory is his conviction that war is "an act of violence designed to force our opponent to submit to our will."<sup>5</sup> The enemy will only submit, he points out, if he is "either disarmed in fact or placed in such a position that he is threatened with being disarmed."<sup>6</sup> This is accomplished through the actual or threatened destruction of the enemy's armed force which could best be achieved through decisive battle. To fight and win such a decisive battle became the principal object of all German operational theory. Just as Clausewitz saw in his "absolute war" the ideal embodiment of his *Niederwerfungsstrategie*,<sup>7</sup> or strategy of annihilation, so too an "absolute battle," or Cannae, became the ideal operational goal. It was Moltke's great successor, Schlieffen, who identified Hannibal's defeat of a Roman army by a double envelopment leading first to an encirclement and then the destruction of the Roman forces--the first *Kesselschlacht*--as the ideal operational battle, the model to be forever emulated. Schlieffen's book on Cannae,<sup>8</sup> which incidentally was added to the General Staff reading list of the U.S. Army in the nineteen-twenties, was in turn profoundly influenced by the Historian Hans Delbrueck whose monumental multi-volume *History of the Art of War in the Framework of Political History*<sup>9</sup> has now been translated into English and published by the Greenwood Press. It was Delbrueck who pointed out that Sadowa, Moltke's 1866 victory over the Austrians at

Sadowa was incomplete. Even though it led to a successful termination of the war, the battle was not decisive since the Austrian Army escaped. The defeat of France at Sedan in 1870, however, was in his view the perfect Cannae. This ideal *Kesselschlacht*--double envelopment, encirclement, surrender/destruction of enemy force--remained the dominant goal of all German operational thinking until 1945. The Schlieffen Plan itself, Tannenberg, Hermanstadt in the Romanian Campaign of 1916, Kiev in 1941 and Kursk in 1943 are all examples of how pervasive this concept has been throughout modern German military history. Prussia's geographical position could hardly have been worse from a military point of view when Moltke took over as Chief of Staff in 1867. The Kingdom was surrounded on three sides by major powers--France in the west, Russia in the east and Austria in the south--each possessing larger populations and greater resources. Prussia had been at war with each during the previous hundred years. Indeed, during the Seven Years War she had fought all three at once. The problem of planning and preparing to fight a multi-front war was therefore particularly critical to the Prussian staff. If victory could only be achieved through a decisive battle of annihilation against the principal military forces of each enemy in turn and if such battle should occur as early as possible in the conflict, then an equal deployment against each enemy was not possible.

Clausewitz had pointed out that an army had to be strong both in total force and at the critical point.<sup>10</sup> The only solution, therefore, was to accept considerable risks on one or more fronts while concentrating overwhelming power at the critical point--that point or area where decisive results were to be gained. This is the principle of the *Schwerpunkt*.

To apply the principle of the *Schwerpunkt* either to the initial strategic deployment at the outbreak of war or to subsequent operational and tactical situations requires considerable moral courage from commanders. Yet it has been a constant element of German military practice from the elder Moltke to the present. In 1866 Moltke stripped the Russian frontier and screened off the Armies of Austria's South German allies while concentrating against Benedek in Bohemia. In 1870 the Upper Rhine provinces were left virtually unguarded so that a dominant force could be gathered in the north. The Schlieffen Plan of 1914 which mobilized only one eighth of the German Army against Russia while seven eighths were concentrated against France represents perhaps the ultimate example of this principle in operation. In his original memorandum of 1905 Schlieffen called for a ratio in the West of seven to one on the Belgian and French frontiers, and he was unmoved by a war game variant which had Russian forces occupying Berlin during the third week of the war. The German deployment of 1939 which had the overwhelming bulk of the German Army and Luftwaffe, including *all* of their Panzer and motorized infantry units concentrated against Poland while the Siegfried Line was manned by only

minimal and immobile forces demonstrates how consistent German practice has been in this regard.

The improvement of European roads since Napoleon and the development of the railroad had by Moltke's time enormously increased the speed at which armies could be mobilized, maneuvered, and concentrated. In addition, the telegraph now permitted a senior commander to coordinate the movements of larger units even at considerable distances from himself and each other. Moltke and his bright young men of the General Staff were the first soldiers to understand the consequences of these developments, which were, however, not uniformly favorable to them.

Prussia could mobilize more speedily and effectively than any other nation. Prussia was also the only European state to have maintained a permanent Army Corps organization after Waterloo. Still a Prussian Army Corps of 30,000 men required an entire road for its movements and took a full day to deploy from the march to fighting formation. As even larger units were concentrated in the decisive area, suitable roads would become ever fewer. As a result a large army consisting of several Army Corps would become virtually un-maneuverable once it had concentrated. It could only fight over the ground it actually occupied and only in the general direction it was facing. The Prussian answer was not to do as Napoleon did, that is, to move Army Corps separately and to concentrate before giving battle, but rather to unite only on the battlefield itself during the battle.

This presented almost insurmountable difficulties of command and coordination. The vital initial mobilization and deployment of forces at the beginning of a conflict was no problem. This could be planned long in advance, every action rehearsed, even contingency provided for. From this point on, however, conditions would change rapidly. Unforeseen enemy action, difficulties of terrain and weather, the inevitable disorganization created by large units, and the errors and mistakes --in short Clausewitz's friction and fog of war--made even the best of plans obsolete in a matter of hours.

No commander in chief could hope to deal with these ever-changing conditions. The answer *had* to be decentralized command. The Commander in Chief must permit his army commanders, and they, in turn, their corps commanders, great freedom of action. To prevent this freedom of action from degenerating into chaos, there must be a clearly understood concept of action and a unified and accepted doctrine.

Above all there must be trust. Senior commanders must trust their subordinates to act correctly. Commanders on all levels must trust the commanders of units on both flanks to support any actions they themselves might take and must be ready themselves to provide such support. This is all a great deal easier said than done. There were many failures and mistakes made

in both the 1866 campaign in Bohemia and in the French Campaign of 1870. Nonetheless, the new system of command more than justified itself in battlefield results at Sadowa and Sedan.

It was well that they did, for the very efficiency of the reformed military system of Prussia in mobilizing forces equal to Austria in 1866 and actually superior to France in 1870 (in spite of much larger populations in both countries), carried with it a price. The comparatively large forces Prussia mobilized and equipped in a few short weeks were virtually all she could ever raise. Once gone they could not be replaced. Prussia/Germany was relatively stronger in the first weeks of war than she would ever be again. Victory therefore had to be won quickly or perhaps not at all. This fact gave special urgency to the search for a decisive battle at the earliest possible moment. Sadowa and Sedan proved to German military thinkers that such battles could provide quick victory in war. The failure of the Schlieffen Plan in 1914 did not weaken the conviction. The Polish, Norwegian and French campaigns during the first year of World War II served only to confirm and strengthen German belief in quick and decisive victory through early battles of annihilation. Operation Barbarossa in 1941 represents both the operational success and the ultimate strategic failure of traditional Germany military thinking during the Second World War.

The Prussian military was the only one in Europe to draw the correct tactical conclusions from the Crimean and Italian Wars of the 1850s. While the rest of the military world was blinded by the success of the mass bayonet shock tactics employed by the French Army in those conflicts, the Prussians alone recognized that it was the lethality of modern fire power—even with the muzzle-loading, percussion cap rifles of the day—that was the dominant fact of modern battlefields. The Roon reforms therefore vastly accelerated the rate at which the new quick firing Neyse needle-gun was being acquired by the Prussian infantry. The equally new breech-loading rifled cannon was issued to the artillery.

By 1866 the Prussian Army was completely outfitted with these modern weapons. The new rifles presented the same kind of command problems on the tactical level to smaller units that separated maneuver had imposed on the operational level to larger units. To maximize the effects of the increased firepower of soldiers outfitted with the new rifle and to minimize the casualties caused by enemy firepower, it was necessary to disperse units over much larger areas than ever before. Meanwhile those armies such as the French and Austrian which had embraced shock tactics were using massed battalions in tight formations. Dispersal required decentralized command similar to that imposed on larger units. In this case, however, it was very junior officers or even non-commissioned officers who would have to be trusted to act independently. This problem was solved by creating a simple and unified tactical doctrine which was

constantly practiced and rehearsed in peacetime maneuvers. In addition financial and social incentives were offered in order to retain highly qualified senior non-commissioned officers in uniform. This resulted over a period of years in the creation of a corps of non-commissioned officers that became the envy of the military world.

The real key however to the success of the new operational theory and doctrine and to the tactical excellence which was the precondition for that success was the evolution of the General Staff under Moltke and his successors. The Germans created an intellectual military elite with discriminating selection procedures; and with a rigorous three year education in tactics, military history, command and staff responsibilities, military topography, foreign languages, science and politics at the *Kriegsakademie*.<sup>11</sup> This was followed by a series of demanding troop and staff assignments for military leaders. This elite would serve both as the creator of new doctrine and the defender of the old. To understand how the General Staff could serve at the same time both as a source of innovation and guarantor of intellectual tradition, let us examine the critical role played by the future Field-Marshal Erich von Manstein in planning the campaign of 1940.

The original plan for the invasion of France had been reluctantly prepared by OKH only in response to Hitler's repeated and insistent demands. A warmed-over and diluted rehash of von Schlieffen's World War I version, it called for the German Army to be organized into three army groups. In the South Army Group C under Colonel General Ritter von Leeb, consisting of mainly second line infantry formations, was to pin down the French forces in the Maginot Line by threatening but not actually carrying out an assault on that system of fortifications.

Army Group A under Colonel General von Rundstedt in the center was to attack through the Ardennes Luxembourg and Southern Belgium both to tie down Allied Forces and to serve as a hinge for the principal attack in the North. There, Colonel General von Bock and his Army Group B would constitute the *Schwehrpunkt* of the planned offensive, and he was therefore assigned the mass of the German armor and motorized infantry formations.

Von Bock was to wheel through the Netherlands and northern Belgium, then turn south driving any French and British forces in front of him until he had occupied the Channel ports whose capture had eluded the German Army in the first war.

When this plan reached the Army Groups, Manstein, then a major-general and serving as Rundstedt's chief of staff, was appalled. Not only was this operation a totally predictable rehash of Schlieffen but it did not aim, as in the first war, at any strategically decisive results. Even if successful it would leave an intact and unbroken front still facing the German forces. It could only

result, in his view, in a 1914-18 war of attrition. In short, the OKH Plan was pure *Ermattungsstrategie*.<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that the French High Command expected the Germans to follow this exact strategy and had confidently planned to move strong French forces and virtually the entire BEG into Belgium and possibly into part of Holland as soon as the Germans attacked.<sup>13</sup>

Manstein submitted for Rundstedt's approval a very different alternative plan which they felt would produce decisive results. There then followed weeks of frustrating correspondence with OKH, proving that the "not invented here" (excuse) applied as much to the German Army as to any other organization. By the time Hitler with his famous military intuition intervened to order OKH to adopt and implement Manstein's plan, Manstein had already had Heinz Guderian, Germany's foremost armor theoretician vet it for its feasibility for Panzer units.<sup>14</sup> For his pains, Manstein was removed from his critical staff position and assigned to command an infantry corps in the third echelon, from which position, far in the rear of the Panzer and motorized units that would carry out his concept, Manstein watched Operation *Sichelschnitt* in action.

Few military operations have been more aptly named. *Sichelschnitt* was a classic example of Prussian-German operational theory in action. As in the original OKH version, von Leeb's Army, made up entirely of infantry units, was to tie down the 44 French divisions in the Maginot Line. Von Bock's Army Group B in the north however was given a very different mission. No longer the main actor for the German attack, von Bock was given strong airborne forces and only as many Panzer units as were necessary to *appear* to be the point of main effort. Army Group B was to be the "matador's cape" which would draw the Allied forces north to meet the anticipated German threat. It was a role for which the confident and aggressive Bock was perfectly suited.

The real change was to be in the mission of Army Group A in the center. Rundstedt's forces were now to provide the *Schwerpunkt*. They were to be the sickle which would harvest the Allied armies that von Bock was to entice north. As the attack began Guderian and von Rleist's powerful Panzer divisions accompanied by all available army and SS motorized infantry formation were to push through the difficult but not impassable French and Belgian Ardennes toward the vital Meuse crossings between Namur and Sedan.

This was easier said than done. East-west roads through the Ardennes were few and narrow. Even using both lanes of the narrow roads for one way traffic and ignoring normal march intervals by moving virtually bumper to bumper, the long narrow columns would stretch back to the Rhine and beyond. This involved accepting considerable military risk. The mass of vehicles lined up mile after mile would present a rich and vulnerable target for enemy air power. Effective Luftwaffe air cover was vital as was the inclusion of powerful anti-aircraft artillery units, also under Luftwaffe command, that were included

in the crowded columns of vehicles. These would later prove invaluable in protecting the all important bridges over the Meuse once the crossings were made. Until they reached open country the tank columns remained highly vulnerable to any aggressive enemy response. Even a powerful German Panzer division does not present a difficult tactical problem to an opponent while advancing on a front of only two tanks.

Fortunately for Germany the French and British cooperated ideally with the Manstein conception. The energy and violence of von Bock's attack in the north, featuring a spectacular assault from the air on the powerful fortress of Eben Emael, convinced the Allied High Command that the Germans as expected were making their main effort in the north. They therefore ordered into effect Plan D, the pre-planned advance of the French British forces to the line of the Dyle River. Also the French Air Force and the RAF were instructed to give absolute air priority to the northern sector. Rundstedt's lead Panzer divisions faced only light resistance from the mostly second line French B divisions in the Ardennes and were able to reach the Meuse in force and on schedule before the Allies were totally aware of the threat.

It is at this point that the uniquely German combination of operational brilliance and tactical flexibility would decide the outcome of the entire campaign. The French High Command, which now belatedly recognized the real German intention, began to move reinforcements toward the threatened sector confident that the Germans would not attempt a crossing before powerful artillery forces and ammunition were brought forward. The line of the Meuse was eminently defensible and the High Command was confident that given the two to three days it would take the Germans to bring up the necessary artillery the river line would be made impregnable. The doctrine of the continuous front would once again be proven as it had so often in World War I. Unfortunately for the High Command, Guderian had no intention of waiting for artillery or anything else. Using his tanks, firing at point blank range for direct fire cover and carefully pre-planned support by the Luftwaffe, his infantry fought their way across the river immediately while combat engineers worked feverishly first to ferry a few vital tanks across, then to build the bridges that would allow his divisions to cross in strength. Within 48 hours the bulk of the Panzer forces and their supporting motorized infantry was across the Meuse, re-fueled, re-supplied and ready to advance again--this time over open country beautifully suited for armored operations.

While in a strict sense the German crossing of the Meuse was a purely tactical achievement, it presented the French High Command with a particularly nasty operational and strategic dilemma. Those powerful German forces now west of the Meuse had several options all of which presented real problems for the defenders. First and most obviously they could drive straight on to Paris,

the transportation, communication, and administrative heart of the French military structure as well as the nation's capital. A second option would be to drive south and east into the rear of the Maginot Line, trapping the 44 divisions in that fortress system and effectively laying bare France's eastern defenses. The third option would be to drive west and north toward the channel to cut off the French and British divisions facing von Bock in Belgium.

Characteristically both Gamelin and the French Generals of the front attempted to counter what they viewed as the greater threats while simultaneously attempting to restore an "unbroken" defensive line. Huntzinger moved his Second Army to build a "shoulder" in the South against the anticipated German attack or what would otherwise be the open flank of the Maginot Line. At the same time Corap's Ninth Army was peeling back from the Meuse to protect against the anticipated drive toward Paris. Between the Second and Ninth French Armies there now opened a gap of some eighty kilometers through which Guderian's tanks now poured out toward the Channel as he had always intended.<sup>15</sup>

There was still some serious fighting and high drama ahead. Dunkirk and the Second Battle of France had yet to take place. But for all intents and purposes the campaign was over as soon as the now united ten Panzer divisions broke out of the assembly point at Sedan and began their drive to the coast. At that point the brilliant operational concept envisioned by Manstein weeks before had already succeeded. The rest was mere detail.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>It is interesting to note that even senior German generals shared this high estimation of the French Army and its leaders. Alister Horne, *To Lose a Battle* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 600-604; Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1958), p. 102.

<sup>2</sup>The German Army in 1940 used 640 Panzer Mark I with only 14 mm of armor at the thickest point and mounting only 2 light machine guns; 825 Mark II with 15 mm armor and mounting one heavy machine gun. There were 386 Czech Skoda Tanks all in the Sixth, Seventh and Eighth Panzer Divisions which had no German Mark IV tanks at all. This compares with 258 Mark IV and 564 Mark II German made tanks of the latest design. Guy Chapman, *Why France Fell* (New York, Chicago, San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 347. General Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (New York: Dutton and Co., 1952), p. 472.

<sup>3</sup>Still worth reading of this group of books is Marc Bloch's highly personal account written immediately after the fall of France in 1940. Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat* (New York: Octagon Books, 1968).

<sup>4</sup>General Andre Beaufre, *1940 The Fall of France* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968); Colonel A. Goutard, *Battle of France 1940* (London: Frederick Muller Ltd., 1958); Jacques Benoist-Mechin, *Sixty Days that Shook the West* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1963).

<sup>5</sup>General Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), 1:2; see as well the brilliant essay by Hans Rothfels in Edward Meade Earle, *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), pp. 93-113.

<sup>6</sup>Clausewitz, 1:5.

<sup>7</sup>The concept of *Niedererfassungsstrategie* was first expressed by Hans Delbrueck. See Earle, p. 273.

<sup>8</sup>General Field-Marshal Count Alfred von Schlieffen, *Cannae* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: The Command and General Staff School Press, 1971).

<sup>9</sup>Hans Delbrueck, *History of the Art of War*, 4 vols. (Westport, Conn. and London, England: Greenwood Press, 1975-82).

<sup>10</sup>Clausewitz, 1:207.

<sup>11</sup>See Hansgeorg Model, *Der deutsche Generalstabsoffizier* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag fuer Wehewesen, 1968).

<sup>12</sup>The term *Ermattungstrategie* or Strategy of Attrition was also coined by Hans Delbrueck. Earle, p. 273.

<sup>13</sup>Horne, pp. 161-165; Benoist-Mechin, pp. 38-39.

<sup>14</sup>Guderian, p. 89; Manstein, p. 107.

<sup>15</sup>Guderian, p. 92.