

# **HISTORICAL EVALUATIONS**





# FROM VERSAILLES VIA PARIS TO MOSCOW<sup>\*)</sup> STRATEGIC OPTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES OF THE GERMAN EMPIRE WITH A VIEW TO NATIONAL POWER POLICY (PART 2)

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The Third Reich was geared towards war, exactly as the German Empire was. The period from 30 January 1933 to the beginning of World War II was marked by preparations for war.<sup>1)</sup> In this process, two ideological fundamental principles played a particular role: the first principle was about the drawing of – supposed – lessons from the ‘stab-in-the-back-legend’.<sup>2)</sup>

The second aspect dealt with the fact that everything, ranging from the establishment of a totalitarian state on the basis of the National Socialist ideology through the re-attainment of the position of a major power by the German Reich by breaking the Versailles Treaty to the build-up of the armed forces, was geared towards preparing a war ‘to conquer new living space in the East, including the reckless Germanisation of the new territories’, as Hitler put it in his first speech as Reich Chancellor to the assembled leaders of the Reichswehr in utter honesty as early as 3 February 1933.<sup>3)</sup> This ensured that Hitler and the German Generals shared, in part, the same objectives.<sup>4)</sup>

They were the starting basis for the aggressive foreign and military policy of the Third Reich, which laid the foundation of the war.



## The Ideological Dimension

The idea that it had been ‘the revolution,’ which at the end of World War I had stabbed the forces, which had been victorious in the field, in the back, was at the basis of the National Socialist viewpoint to create a propaganda charged people’s community<sup>5)</sup>, which, even in the event of a war taking an adverse course, would continue standing loyally behind its Führer and the Wehrmacht – which was the foundation of the internal preparations for war. They were linked to the external preparations for war – the foreign policy and the military-strategic approach in the subsequent years until 1939 – by way of the effort to acquire autonomy. In order not to depend on overseas deliveries of resources any longer – which in World War I had resulted in gigantic supply problems of all types due to the blockade by the British Navy – an Eastern Empire<sup>6)</sup>, which had become effective through the advance into the collapsing former Russian Empire in 1918 for a brief period of time and which was perceived as a potential chance for the future to ensure the strategic autonomy of the German Reich.

The exploitation and the land use of the intended Eastern National Socialist Colonial Empire could only be upheld by way of a gigantic enslaved workforce of ‘Slavic Untermenschen,’ which would be spared from the industrially organised annihilation machinery.<sup>7)</sup> To conquer this area, from the National Socialist perspective, it was necessary for the foreign political and the military-strategic approaches to make sure, at first, that the home base was secured and that the strategic back area was sufficiently unassailable. By way of ‘collecting Germans’ and rolling up the strategic flanks, the states of Central and Eastern Europe that separated the German Reich and the Soviet Union were to be incorporated into the National Socialist domain. Only the gradual establishment of a common German-Soviet military border made a war possible that violated international law and was, in principle, a criminal war based on racial ideology: the offensive war and annihilation war against the Soviet Union.



## The Military-political Dimension

Already in March 1935, the announcement and the introduction of universal conscription and of the air force were obvious violations of the provisions of the Versailles Treaty. The aim was to expand the army<sup>8)</sup>, complement the disposition of the forces<sup>9)</sup> and boost the armaments industry, while simultaneously reducing unemployment. As a side-effect, the establishment of a 'National Socialist people's community' with a social and modern impetus promoted the further expansion and the increasing homogeneity, i.e. consolidation, of the internal-political 'consent dictatorship'.<sup>10)</sup>

The rapid augmentation of the Wehrmacht since 1935 had, against the backdrop of the Four-Year-Plan decreed in the summer of 1936 and which proved to be a defence and armament-political catalyst, consumed immense resources and encouraged rivalries among the branches of the German Wehrmacht. The Air Force, especially, which was to be set up by Hermann Göring, received a disproportionately high amount, to the displeasure of the Army and the Navy. In the course of a clarifying talk, held in the Reich Chancellery on 5 November 1937, Hitler pushed for accelerating armaments and referred to the 'problem of space' to be clarified as urgent, but not without danger. At the latest by 1943 to 1945 there would be a war, already under favourable framework conditions in 1938.<sup>11)</sup>

The shake-up at the top of the Wehrmacht in the course of the Blomberg-Fritsch crisis in February 1938, with the establishing of the Armed Forces High Command under Colonel-General Wilhelm Keitel and Hitler's taking over of the supreme command of the Wehrmacht, definitely brought down the nominally already non-existent independent role of the Wehrmacht as the second pillar of the National Socialist state.<sup>11)</sup>

## Foreign-political Stations of the Preparations for War

The protest of the signatory powers of the Versailles Treaty against the first grave violation by the Third Reich due to the measures taken in March 1935 – the diplomatic 'front of Stresa' – was restrained. Italy aimed at re-establishing its old



Roman grandeur and at seizing the opposite coast in Northern Africa as a colony. In parallel with the war in Abyssinia, Mussolini challenged the British position in the Mediterranean. Even when, in March 1936, the Wehrmacht had marched into the demilitarised Rhineland, Great Britain still looked at Italy – letting, for France, a seriously confrontational situation escalate, only because German soldiers in German uniforms moved into German territory, did not seem tolerable to Great Britain. The hesitant and soft-rated reactions of the Western democracies encouraged the dictator to accelerate the pace of the preparations for his goals.

Hitler's foreign-political achievements so far were already considerable: The concordat signed between the Third Reich and the Vatican on 20 July 1933 provided Hitler with the 'knightly accolade' in terms of international law and increased his legitimacy. On 26 January 1934, a non-aggression pact was signed for a period of 10 years, which removed the potential pressure on the eastern border of the Reich. In a popular vote, on 13 January 1935, 91 percent of the population consented to the accession of the Saarland to the Reich.

Thus, France's weak alliance system of the post-World War I era had completely failed. The Franco-Soviet Treaty of Mutual Assistance (2 May 1935) entered into force briefly after that and, indeed, seemed to provide France with new options, especially as the Treaty of Mutual Assistance between the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, which was signed on 16 May 1935, posed the problem of a possible diversion to the Reich in the southeast. This alleged strategic benefit for France was counteracted downright by the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 18 June 1935, the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo. Again, it became painfully apparent to France that Hitler had gradually managed to successfully realise his objectives. Simultaneously, this showed Hitler that Great Britain's policy to stabilise its Empire in the Far East opened up the chance for him to obtain concessions on the continent. This attitude of Great Britain's, interpreted as weakness, encouraged Hitler to take the next steps.

When considering the foreign policy of the Third Reich, as it prepared for the war under a strategic viewpoint, the employment of the Legion Condor in support of General Franco, who was making a coup, in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) was to be seen less from the perspective of a test of the new German air force. In order to be able to strategically act in the east of the continent, Hitler had to make sure that he was safe in his strategic back yard in the west. A socialist Spain and



a France that was potentially ruled by a People's Front were a constant latent threat. In the event of a Franco victory, Hitler could achieve various benefits: A fascist Spain might owe gratitude and even provide troops in Hitler's subsequent war, while it might also deliver strategic mineral resources for the German armaments industry. At least, should all this not be the case, it would force France to deploy troop contingents to the Pyrenees, which could then not be deployed at the German Western front – in a war against France exactly as in a war in the east to support France's ally Poland.

The next step of National Socialist foreign policy, which was directed at expansion, was taken before the backdrop of the aggravation of Austro-German relations due to the popular vote that Chancellor Schuschnigg intended to hold on the further sovereignty of Austria. This offered Hitler the chance to distract from the Blomberg-Fritsch crisis in February 1938 and to improve his strategic position. With the invasion of Austria by the Wehrmacht in March 1938. Hitler gained additional 'Germans', new divisions of the armed forces of Austria's First Republic and an enormous gain in foreign exchange.<sup>14)</sup>

Of course, the repeated violations against the system of the Treaty of Versailles provoked renewed protest on the part of France, which, due to the Spanish Civil War, its tense internal political situation and the rejecting position of Great Britain, stood alone and, therefore, was unable to actively do something about it.

For Great Britain, which continued to be bound in the Far East, with Japan taking its aggressive expansive course, and which warily scrutinised Mussolini's Italy, an intervention was not possible due to ideological reasons, as Hitler could indicate that, exactly as when his troops had entered into the demilitarised Rhineland, the approval of his foreign policy was overwhelming.<sup>15)</sup> The restrained British protest was, lastly, also a reflection of blatant real politics – the addition of Austria to the National Socialist Empire did not have any effect on Gibraltar, Malta, and the Suez Canal, the neuralgic points of the British maritime-strategic axis in the Mediterranean. Since the occupation of Austria, a general systematic creation of glacis was to be noticed, aimed at winning over the strategic flank of every state between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union by way of political pressure and reprisals or even blackmail.



Since March 1938, Czechoslovakia had been threatened by the new Greater German Reich from the north, the west and the south. As the next intermediate goal, the instrumentalisation of the Sudeten-Germans was to contribute to undermining Czechoslovakia's state fundament. The diplomatic solution found at the Munich Conference in 1938 was, however, only a ceasefire before the war.<sup>16)</sup>

The addition of the Sudetenland was not insignificant for Hitler. Both Western powers could not protect the territorial integrity of the only remaining democracy in Central Eastern Europe; the third 'Flowers Campaign' of the Wehrmacht, after the invasions of the Rhineland and Austria, brought the Czechoslovak border fortifications<sup>17)</sup> for the Greater German Empire and important deposits of mineral resources, while leaving the remainder of Czechoslovakia unprotected. Great Britain's appeasement policy seemed to give Hitler the certainty that he had free rein in the East. The Soviet Union had become, since it was disregarded as a major power by Great Britain and France, a potential temporary partner for Hitler with regard to future territorial changes. But also in terms of propaganda, Hitler could feel safe; everything seemed to be compatible with the right of self-rule, even if the Sudeten-Germans had been brought back into the Reich.

This manoeuvred Czechoslovakia into a dangerous military-strategic defensive position. Its break-up, to which Poland and Hungary also contributed in March 1939, resulted in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, whereas the split-off part of Moravia was placed under the protection of the Greater German Reich, which had the right to establish German bases. It was evident that the next victim would be Poland, a fact that at the end of March 1939 caused England to make a declaration of support for the integrity of the Polish western border. Any action against Poland by force would invariably result in a two-front war.

Hitler wanted to avert this danger through the propagandist-ideological turn-around by way of an arrangement with Stalin. Hitler could offer Stalin large parts of Eastern Central Europe, because he intended to take them away again from the Soviet Union in the course of the planned war. His advantage was that he restricted the diplomatic scope of action of the Western powers, by manoeuvring the power factor Soviet Union out of their reach and by forcing the Polish forces to strategically divert their troops to the east of the country, which the Red Army threatened to invade, while reducing the pressure on the Wehrmacht, which in turn would advance in the west.



But the Hitler-Stalin Pact also made sense for the Soviet Union:<sup>18)</sup> it provided Stalin with a huge security glacis in front of his Soviet-Russian Western border, which even in the event of an attack by Hitler afforded space and time for a strategic wearing out. In addition to this military-strategic benefit, Stalin also gained an overall-strategic status increase for being ideologically 'recognised': A successful campaign by Hitler against Poland could not be tolerated by the Western powers, Great Britain and France. This would result in a war for the Third Reich against, at least, France, which would considerably reduce the pressure on Stalin's Western Front. Stalin could stall for time and hope that, later on, he would be granted the role of a referee, which would convert his relative status of power, in conjunction with the reciprocal weakening of the 'capitalist' Western powers, into a guaranteed strategic advantage. This was exclusively owed to the rapid success of the Wehrmacht in France and to Hitler's unbridled will to attack the Soviet Union despite the simultaneously ongoing war against Great Britain, also known as the Battle of Britain<sup>19)</sup>, which foiled this costly and over-dimensioned solution: Stalin had overestimated the will and the capabilities of Great Britain and France, while underestimating those of the Third Reich.

## **Military-strategic Perspectives of 1939-1941**

With the quick suppression of Poland in September 1939, the Wehrmacht basically managed a reversed Schlieffen plan:<sup>20)</sup> One out of two possible opponents had been subdued in a brief period of time. By turning around counter-clockwise and moving towards the north through Denmark to Norway, from the (military-) strategic viewpoint Operation Weserübung became a triple success. The naval and aerial front against Great Britain was extended; the control of the accesses to the Baltic Sea prevented the potential link-up of Great Britain with the Soviet Union, while at the same time the supply of important mineral ores from Sweden was ensured to strengthen the defence-economic basis.

The war against France, which was considered as the strongest military power of Europe, again seemed set to become a potentially long war, from the viewpoint of the generals of the Wehrmacht. The memory of World War I was also alive in France. France, by constructing the Maginot Line, perpetuated the scenario



of World War I, derived from the perception of four years of static positional warfare and trench warfare.

The German Reich decided to go for another option: also due to the fact that the Reichswehr was forbidden to maintain an air force, as stipulated in the Versailles Treaty of 1919,<sup>22)</sup> the concept of an operationally mobile armoured attack force was developed. While France considered tank forces less important than infantry forces (with effects on doctrine and speed), the Wehrmacht held exercises on operational-tactical terrain with the approach of 'fire and movement', including close-air support and battlefield interdiction, thereby already training for those Blitzkrieg tactics that, despite frictions, led quickly to Dunkirk in May 1940, where divergent political considerations caused a halt.<sup>23)</sup>

Moreover, the subsequent occupation of large parts of France caused quite some surprise among the military leaders, as the objectives of World War I had been far exceeded in a brief time frame. By taking control of the French Atlantic coast, a strategic maritime position opened up to the National Socialist Third Reich, which would have been unattainable for the Imperial Naval Command; yet the success in France and the maritime positions opening up against Great Britain and also in a planned 'World War' in the future against the USA were not Hitler's War.

What succeeded against expectations in the west became the plan for Operation Barbarossa<sup>24)</sup> in the east. From the political and the military viewpoints, a quick victory was expected. The success against France, Stalin's (overrated) cleansing of the officers corps of the Red Army, the difficulties of the Red Army in the Winter War against Finland of 1939/40, and also the memory of the Eastern Empire established by the German troops in 1918 after the railway advance; this, in conjunction with the racial-ideological superiority delusion, led to an overall-political and military situation assessment<sup>25)</sup> that, together with the lessons learned from the French campaign, on the military organisational level depicted the successful doctrinal concept: one tank group each was assigned to the Army Groups North and South, two tank groups to the Army Group Centre, which had to provide the main effort in the attack, to set out north and south of the gigantic Pripyat Marshes with the goal laid down in Instruction No 21 as 'The final objective of the operation is interdiction against the Asian Russia from the general line Volga - Arkhangelsk'<sup>26)</sup> and which started its attack on the Soviet



Union on 22 June 1941, taking the Wehrmacht in December 1941 almost to the Kremlin. At the latest since December 1941 ('turn of events before Moscow',<sup>27)</sup> declaration of war on the USA), the final victory of the Greater German Empire had become improbable.

That for the raid on the Soviet Union in June 1941 an operational concept, which had been successful against France in 1940, was made the military basis of a war of ideologies, which later on was successful only on the tactical level, causes a feeling of oppression, which cannot be documented on the basis of sources, that a 'twilight of the gods'-like situation had already been staged from the beginning.<sup>29)</sup>

## **Operational Thinking in the German Army in Peacetime and Wartime of 1933-1945**

### **Operational thinking in the Wehrmacht until the beginning of the war**

World War I had shown the weaknesses of German operational thinking<sup>30)</sup> in a ruthlessly candid manner. Nevertheless, the majority of German officers were convinced that superior enemy potential could be outmanoeuvred by rapid operations.

The significance that the Director of the High Command, Colonel-General Hans von Seeckt, attributed to operational training in the army of the Third Reich is documented by the establishment of the 'Guidelines for the Upper Echelons in War'.<sup>31)</sup> They were, since the instructions 'Command and Combined Weapons Warfare' only addressed the tactical commanders, to deal with the higher commanders. The paper submitted by Colonel Konstantin Hierl on the orders of the Truppenamt (the camouflaged general staff, due to the Versailles Treaty) is a unique monument to the operational thinking in the Reichswehr at the beginning of the 1920s, advocating the exception of individual formulations absolutely in line with classic operational thinking. As at the time of Schlieffen, the objective of all operations was to destroy the enemy forces. Politicians continued to be denied a say in the conduct of operations. With regard to the problem of inferiority of manpower, the motto continued that better quality of command



and control and troops in combination with quick operations to a certain extent offsets enemy superiority. The special significance of psychic factors and of the indomitable will to victory is underlined time and again in the context of inferiority of manpower and materiel. In the chapter, 'Army Movement', Hierl addresses the significance and the limitations of motorisation for the operational command. In this way, he considers the employment of tanks as still very difficult, due to their technical vulnerability. The guidelines presented by Hierl reflect, in their innovative and restorative elements, the dichotomy in which the command of the Reichswehr found itself in the 1920s. The Reichswehr, by a long way inferior to all potential enemies in terms of materiel and manpower, developed a modern, innovative tactic that was focused on movement and combined weapons warfare, while in operational thinking it was caught between restorative and innovative deliberations or utopian designs of large-scale operational warfare. These were firmly based on Schlieffen's ideas and were modernised only selectively by way of experiences from the war, such as the incorporation of penetration. In the centre of the guidelines stood, like at the time of Schlieffen, the attack with the aim to envelope the enemy. This shows, in particular, the restorative moment of Hierl's paper, since the World War had brought about the end of the claim to the universal validity of envelopement.<sup>32)</sup>

With the development of modern tanks and aircraft, as well as the progress in communications technology, the combat assets for quick mobile operational warfare seemed to be available at the end of the 1920s. The first deliberations in that respect had been heatedly debated in the Reichswehr in military technical journals within the framework of an excessive perception of the French concepts, which considered the tank as an auxiliary means of the infantry and, therefore, preferred heavy tanks with little mobility, as opposed to the British concepts, which advocated light and medium tanks for the operations of independent units.

In this way, already a few years after World War I, Friedrich von Bernhardi had treated the topic of the significance of tanks for mobile warfare in a future war.<sup>34)</sup> Other officers, like Heinz Guderian, who would later be promoted to Colonel-General, were convinced that the potential of combat vehicles and airplanes was not exploited very far and had to be considered in future operational deliberations and training.<sup>35)</sup> He discussed this standpoint for the first time in 1927 in his article 'Mobile Units',<sup>36)</sup> which referred to British ideas, and documented that the infantry



and the cavalry, as the World War had shown, did not have enough offensive power vis-à-vis the firepower of modern defensive weapons in order to quickly resolve a battle by force. Combat vehicles, however, had that firepower in combination with airplanes. Therefore, he advocated the establishment of a combat vehicles unit that, in conjunction with the air force, would be capable of carrying out combat tasks independently and be employed within the framework of mobile warfare. All these deliberations took place at a moment in which Germany, due to the Versailles Treaty, still did not have tanks or airplanes and was limited to an army of 100,000 in strength.

This changed, however, when Hitler seized power in January 1933. On 16 March 1935, Hitler, in parallel with the Act on the Build-up of the Army, proclaimed defence sovereignty and re-introduced universal conscription. This also brought about the transition of the defensive build-up, which had already been initiated previously, to the offensive build-up. The goal was to set up a mass army and offensive army, which was capable of resolving a war quickly in a continental European two-front or multiple-front war, despite its inferiority in manpower. Whether this would be possible in reality was highly controversial. Economic, financial and material aspects receded into the background vis-à-vis the primacy of operational planning traditionally prevalent in the German General Staff.

Upon which operational foundations should the armed forces be built? The question whether the tank was to be the combat asset of mobile warfare implemented the operational doctrine, which was still considered as valid, was answered in the affirmative by almost all officers. What was heatedly discussed was the decisive question whether tanks should be used as an auxiliary means of the infantry or in operationally independent tank units.

The Head of the General Army Office, Colonel-General Friedrich Fromm, advocated strengthening the classic infantry component. He was convinced that the tank served infantry best if it allowed the infantry to penetrate into the enemy fortified position system. For him, tank units, exactly as the artillery, were support troops of the infantry and should be used in support of the infantry within limited counterattacks.<sup>37)</sup>

Other officers, like Walter Nehring, who would later become a General, demanded tanks be employed operationally in combat. Based on experiences from abroad,



war experiences and their own ideas, they developed a tactical-operational concept for the operational deployment of tanks.<sup>38)</sup> Its pillar was, among other things, the assault party and the combat group procedures developed and used successfully by the Germans in World War I.<sup>39)</sup> The tanks should not be deployed in a scattered manner, but massively and in places, where the tactical attack might resolve the battle. With the support of the air force, the engineers, the motorised infantry and the artillery, the tank force should, thanks to its thrusting force, in combined weapons warfare independent of the slow attack speed of the infantry, seek to penetrate the enemy lines. The preconditions for successful deployment were: making the main effort, suitable terrain, surprise and massive employment in sufficient width and depth. The targets of a tank attack were, primarily, antitank assets, the artillery, the reserves and command centres in the depth of the defensive area. After successfully breaking through, the tank divisions comprised in a major tank unit should take action in a mobile manner against the enemy's flank and rear and conduct enveloping operations, with the goal of resolving the battle.<sup>40)</sup> The development of an operational deployment of tanks was not exclusively owed to Guderian, contrary to what could be read until recent years in specialist literature on the history of the German tank forces, thanks to skilful self-presentation and media work,<sup>41)</sup> but to a larger group of officers.<sup>42)</sup> In this respect, the Austrian General Ludwig Ritter von Eimannsberger deserves particular mention. In his book, he was among the first ones to advocate the operational employment of tank units and he explicitly remarks on the future use of tanks: "My theory advocates the operational exploitation of tanks as the main force. To do so, it establishes the tank division, a new operational unit, consisting of all branches, but with the armoured vehicle as the main weapon, for the purpose of penetration in combat; and the motorised division, a fast division, which is to cooperate with the tank division on the one hand, for quickly shifting within the anti-tank units. This book supports close cooperation of armoured vehicles and airplanes"<sup>43)</sup> Eimannsberger's manuscript significantly influenced Guderian's ideas with regard to the operational employment of tanks.<sup>44)</sup> Also the claim, partly spread by Guderian himself, that he had had to force the operational use of tanks through against a traditionalist group around the Chief of Defence Staff, Colonel-General Ludwig Beck, in the General Staff, does not bear up against newer studies. Beck had well realised the significance of operational tank units and, on principle, he was not against setting up armoured units – the dissent between



Beck and Guderian is to be attributed to ministerial differences of opinion and a deep personal aversion between the two officers.<sup>46)</sup>

While there was quarrelling over the issue as to whether tanks should be used in support of the infantry or in an operationally independent manner by way of tank divisions, in 1937/38 the decision went in favour of the latter option, whereas the operational innovation, as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, developed slowly and against internal resistance from a tactical innovation by the Germans, i.e. the assault party and the combat group procedures. The tactical-operational innovation process, which had already set in before World War I and which is reflected in the then new Army instructions 'Command and Combined Weapons Warfare' and 'Leading Troops', but also in the development of the tank doctrine, did not go in a cumbersome manner, despite all the problems faced, as military learning processes are attributed to be like. As compared to the other European countries, the process went quite quickly and in a determined manner.

It cannot be denied that the new Army build-up was a restoration of the Imperial Army, including military-technological and organisational changes. This also applied to operational thinking. While the newly established General Staff generally managed to implement its operational concepts, it failed in its attempt to maintain its unique leading position in operational issues and to secure its traditional power position within the military structure. Still caught up in Emperor William's thinking, which advocated a uni-dimensional notion of power as military power, in parallel to the build-up of the mass army and offensive army and to the struggle for the power position of the Army and the General Staff in the military overall structure, the fundamental discussion went on between the General Staff and the Armed Forces High Command, whether operational deliberations had to subordinate to political expectations or whether military operations depended on operational-strategic premises. The stepping down of Beck in September 1938 as a consequence of the Blomberg-Fritsch crisis, the German war planning against Czechoslovakia and Hitler's taking over of the supreme command of the Wehrmacht decided that question to the detriment of the High Command and the General Staff. In the following years, the political leaders in the person of Hitler increasingly interfered with the innermost areas of the operational planning by the General Staff. "The enforced conformity of the



Wehrmacht in the field of operational planning,” said Deist, “was conducted after the stepping down of Beck quickly and without frictions.”<sup>47)</sup>

A central military planning and command body, which had been in existence as early as in World War I, was again not created – a gap that Hitler exploited very aptly.

## **Operational thinking and acting since the beginning of the war**

A quarter-century after the start of World War I, the German Reich initiated World War II on 1 September 1939 with the raid on Poland. In contrast to World War I, Germany entered into it without having prepared war plans. A strategic blitzkrieg concept existed neither with the political nor the military leaders of the Reich.<sup>48)</sup> On the contrary: the operations plans for the attack on Poland were concluded only a few months before the commencement of the attack, and those for France were finished even after the victory over Poland.<sup>49)</sup> The General Staff did not act in a vacuum, because its operational planning was based on German operational thinking. Also, under the dictator Adolf Hitler it was clear in the General Staff that the decision, which resolved the battle as fast as possible, circumvented the superior enemy potential and decided the war as fast as possible, was to be taken.

The quick successes in the unplanned blitzkriegs against Poland and France covered up the fact that the problem of mobility was resolved only superficially, since of the 157 divisions available at the beginning of the attack in the West in 1940 only 16 divisions were fully motorised and, therefore, suited to operationally mobile warfare without reservations.<sup>50)</sup> 90 percent of the Army divisions were not different to the divisions of World War I in terms of mobility. Their speed was determined by the marching speed of the infantrymen and that of the artillery pieces drawn by trotting horses. The German Army was a two-class army not only in terms of mobility, but also in terms of armaments. In 1940, many of the older soldiers still fought with the weapons they had used in World War I. The notion of a ‘fully motorised German blitzkrieg army’, which is so popular, is the result of a skilfully orchestrated and still effective National Socialist propaganda campaign



that covered up that the Wehrmacht of World War II used more horses than the Imperial Army in World War I.<sup>51)</sup>

The different degrees of motorisation of the Army forced the operators in the General Staff to re-evaluate the factor time. The question was to be answered as to how an army could conduct mobile operations in view of 'two speeds and different qualities'. The General Staff officers found their answer in classic German operational thinking. Entirely in line with Schlieffen's doctrine, in the campaigns in Poland and in the West, they resorted to a consistent building of main efforts, involving high risks, of motorised elite units, supported by tactical air operations. In this way, the troops enforced penetrations and pressed hard to decide the battle. Together with the element of surprise, which is also central to the German conduct of operations, the victories over Poland and France became a triumph of German operational thinking. In so doing, Schlieffen's grandsons expanded the original envelopment doctrine, out of necessity, by tactical-operational penetration, which had been neglected by Schlieffen himself. The unexpected successes in the first years of war cannot mislead us that the core problem of German operational thinking had not been resolved at the beginning of World War II. Thus, a clear operational-strategic decision was not taken in the planning phase of the attack on the Soviet Union. Hitler put aside the intended classic decision of the battle as the aim of the operation proposed by the General Staff in favour of economic and ideological territorial goals. The conflict that flared up between Hitler and Halder about the operations plan against the Soviet Union<sup>52)</sup> shook the foundations of the operational thinking of the General Staff, as Hitler called into question the dogma of the annihilation of the enemy forces, which is the very objective of battle. Lastly, the dictator imposed his ideas.

The course of the war against the Soviet Union revealed the weaknesses of the strategy. The insufficient degree of motorisation resulted in the faster units having to adjust their advance to that of the slower ones, only partly motorised or non-motorised infantry divisions. The annihilation battles aimed at by the General Staff that were to resolve the war did not take place. Also, the building of main efforts, traditionally applied to offset inferiority in manpower, had limited effect, exactly as in World War I, when the Army had to wage war beyond the regions close to the border of Central Europe in the depths of Russian territory. The campaign against Russia revealed an operational hubris, which was fed by a feeling



of superiority, derived from the victory over France and the experiences with the Russian forces of World War I, which were perceived to have been brushed away then almost with their 'left hand'. These convictions, which very soon turned out to be misperceptions based on the propaganda spread by the Nazi regime that the Germanic peoples were superior to the Slavic ones, also ignored the warnings by Helmut von Moltke the Elder and Schlieffen regarding the depth of the Russian territory as well as their experiences with the valour of the Russian soldiers defending their country in the past World War.<sup>53)</sup>

The one-sided concentration on the operational element of conducting operations increased the traditional neglect of logistics in German operational thinking. The traditional logistical concept of the Army, which was designed for warfare close to the borders in the Central European area, had worked in the West in a limited manner and already reached its limits in the planning phase of the raid on the Soviet Union.<sup>54)</sup>

Operation Barbarossa showed the structural strategic deficit inherent in German operational thinking. Since Schlieffen, the over-emphasis on operational thinking had led to a neglect of the strategic dimension. This failure led to one-dimensional military thinking in the General Staff and opened up the opportunity for Hitler to disempower it by and large, first, on the operational-strategic and, then, on the operational-tactical level and to take over the operational, in parts even the tactical, command of the Army. While the military leaders still advocated quickly outmanoeuvring the enemy build-up of resources as the only solution to the German strategic dilemma in order to prevent a long war of attrition and people's war, the Supreme Command, due to the experiences of World War I, did not exclude long-winding attrition, economic and people's wars. This strategic way of thinking of the Supreme Command, which was more in conformity with Hitler's strategic and economic 'area conquest and domination ideas', was rather alien to the operators in the General Staff. They only integrated those factors of modern technological warfare in their conduct of operations, which fitted into the operational concept passed on to them. Lastly, to implement its operational concept, the General Staff was even willing to balance out the structural deficits of the German operational doctrine, such as the neglect of logistics or the considerable inferiority in number, by way of crimes of war. This had the result that the war against the Soviet Union, in contrast to the campaigns in the West,



grew into a fully-fledged annihilation war, in the course of which the enemy forces were not merely to be incapacitated in the classic sense of the German concept of the annihilation war, but in which the starving to death of Soviet prisoners and large parts of the population was accepted.

These aspects of the German conduct of war were dismissed by and large in the General Staff and by operators, such as Field Marshal General Erich von Manstein, exactly as the strategic aspects. Caught in their classic operational thinking that was aimed at resolving the battle, the Generals perceived that Hitler's orders to halt operations in the defensive and his erroneous operational-strategic approach in the offensive would cost them their success. It was Hitler's fault, and not the one-dimensional operational-strategic thinking, at least that was what Manstein tried to suggest after losing World War II, which had downgraded the operational successes of the Army, and with that of the General Staff, to 'lost victories'. As in World War I, personalising the blame offered the possibility to distract from the structural deficits of German operational thinking of World War II. The utter underestimation of the enemy, together with the overestimation of their own possibilities, showed that the High Command fell prey to the same delusion as the Supreme Army Command in World War I.

The German operational doctrine was the military attempt to resolve the strategic dilemma of wanting to achieve continental hegemony without having a sufficient economic, military and political power base. This was based on Germany's denial of reality of the actual power potential on the part of the military and the political elites. The German operational thinking had always taken high risks, endangering the existence of the Reich, and was by no means a recipe for victory, but lastly a mere emergency solution – the doctrine for 'the poor man's war', striving for a 'place in the sun'.

## Notes:

- 1) On foreign policy cf. Marie-Luise Recker: Die Außenpolitik des Dritten Reiches 1933-1945, München 1990 (= Enzyklopädie Deutscher Geschichte, 8.
- 2) Cf. Boris Barth: Dolchstoßlegenden und politische Desintegration. Das Trauma der deutschen Niederlage im Ersten Weltkrieg 1914-1933, Düsseldorf 2003 and Rainer



- Sammet: "Dolchstoß". Deutschland und die Auseinandersetzung mit der Niederlage im Ersten Weltkrieg (1918-1933), Berlin 2003.
- 3) Cf. generally Andreas Wirsching: „Man kann nur Boden germanisieren“. Eine neue Quelle zu Hitlers Rede vor den Spitzen der Reichswehr am 3. Februar 1933. In: Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte 49 (2001) no. 3, pp. 131-150.
  - 4) On the term cf. Manfred Messerschmidt: Die Wehrmacht im NS-Staat. Zeit der Indoktrination, Hamburg 1969, p. 1.
  - 5) Cf. Ian Kershaw: "Volksgemeinschaft". Potenzial und Grenzen eines neuen Forschungskonzeptes. In: Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte 59 (2011) no. 1, pp. 1-17.
  - 6) Cf. Hildebrandt: Das vergangene Reich, pp.363-372 and Winfried Baumgart: Deutsche Ostpolitik 1918. Von Brest-Litowsk bis zum Ende des Ersten Weltkrieges, Wien et al. 1966.
  - 7) Cf. Mark Mazower: Hitlers Imperium. Europa unter der Herrschaft der Nationalsozialisten, München 2011 and Mechthild Rößler/Sabine Schleiermacher (ed.): Der "Generalplan Ost". Hauptlinien der nationalsozialistischen Planungs- und Vernichtungspolitik, Berlin 1993.
  - 8) Cf. Jürgen Förster: Die Wehrmacht im NS-Staat. Eine strukturgeschichtliche Analyse, München 2007 (= Militärgeschichte kompakt vol. 2).
  - 9) Cf. Karl-Heinz Völker: Die deutsche Luftwaffe 1933-1939. Aufbau, Führung und Rüstung der Luftwaffe sowie die Entwicklung der deutschen Luftkriegstheorie, 2. ed., Stuttgart 1967 (= Beiträge zur Militär- und Kriegsgeschichte, 8).
  - 10) On the term cf. Frank Bajohr: Die Zustimmungsdiktatur. Grundzüge nationalsozialistischer Herrschaft in Hamburg. In: Hamburg im „Dritten Reich“, ed. by the Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte Hamburg, Göttingen 2005, pp. 69-121.
  - 11) Cf. Bernd-Jürgen Wendt: Großdeutschland. Außenpolitik und Kriegsvorbereitung des Hitler-Regime, München 1987, pp. 192-202.
  - 12) Cf. principally Klaus-Jürgen Müller: Das Heer und Hitler. Armee und nationalsozialistisches Regime 1933-1940, Stuttgart 1969 (= Beiträge zur Militär- und Kriegsgeschichte Bd.10) and Hans-Ulrich Thamer: Die Erosion einer Säule. Wehrmacht und NSDAP. In: Rolf-Dieter Müller/Hans-Erich Volkmann (ed.): Die Wehrmacht. Mythos und Realität, München 1999, pp. 420-435.
  - 13) Cf. Walter L. Bernecker: Krieg in Spanien 1936-1939, 2. ed., Darmstadt 2005.
  - 14) Cf. Paul Kennedy: Aufstieg und Fall der großen Mächte. Ökonomischer Wandel und kriegerische Konflikte von 1500 bis 2000, Frankfurt/M. 1987, p. 464.
  - 15) Cf. Mazower: Hitlers Imperium, p. 59.
  - 16) Cf. Hildebrandt: Das vergangene Reich, pp. 651-666.
  - 17) Cf. the picture in Bernecker: Europa zwischen den Kriegen, p. 97.



- 18) Cf. also Heinrich Schwendemann: Die wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit zwischen dem Deutschen Reich und der Sowjetunion von 1939 bis 1941. Alternative zu Hitlers Ostprogramm, Berlin 1993 (= Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte Osteuropas, 31).
- 19) Cf. Klaus A. Maier: Die Luftschlacht um England. In: MGFA (ed.), Die Errichtung der Hegemonie auf dem europäischen Kontinent, Stuttgart 1979 (= Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg, 2), pp. 375-408.
- 20) Cf. Groß: „Raum“ als operationsgeschichtliche Kategorie, p. 134.
- 21) Cf. Hans-Martin Ottmer: „Weserübung“. Der deutsche Angriff auf Dänemark und Norwegen im April 1940, München 1995 (= Operationen des Zweiten Weltkrieges, 1).
- 22) Cf. article 198: „Deutschland darf Luftstreitkräfte weder zu Lande noch zu Wasser als Teil seines Heerwesens unterhalten.“ Reichsgesetzblatt [Imperial Law Gazette] 1919, pp. 1333-1349.
- 23) Cf. Karl-Heinz Frieser: Blitzkrieg-Legende. Der Westfeldzug 1940, München 1995 (= Operationen des Zweiten Weltkrieges, 1).
- 24) Cf. Roland G. Foerster (ed.): „Unternehmen Barbarossa“. Zum historischen Ort der deutsch-sowjetischen Beziehungen von 1933 bis Herbst 1941, München 1993 (= Beiträge zur Militärgeschichte, 40) and Rolf-Dieter Müller/Gerd R. Ueberschär (ed.): Hitlers Krieg im Osten 1941-1945. Ein Forschungsbericht. Darmstadt 2000.
- 25) Cf. Hans-Erich Volkmann (ed.): Das Russlandbild im Dritten Reich, Böhlau, Köln et al. 1994.
- 26) Walther Hubatsch (ed.): Hitlers Weisungen für die Kriegführung 1939-1945. Dokumente des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht, München 1965, p. 97.
- 27) Cf. Klaus Reinhardt: Die Wende vor Moskau. Das Scheitern der Strategie Hitlers im Winter 1941/42, München 1972 (= Beiträge zur Militär- und Kriegsgeschichte, 13).
- 28) Cf. Recker: Außenpolitik des Dritten Reiches, p. 37f.
- 29) Cf. Bernd Wegner: Hitler, der Zweite Weltkrieg und die Choreographie des Untergangs. In: Geschichte und Gesellschaft 26 (2000), pp. 493-518.
- 30) On that generally the latest by Gerhard P. Groß: Mythos und Wirklichkeit. Die Entwicklung des operativen Denkens im deutschen Heer, Paderborn et al. 2012 (=Zeitalter der Weltkrieg, 9).
- 31) Leitlinien für die obere Führung im Kriege by Oberst Hierl 1923, Barch, RH 2/2901. Hierl left active service on 30. November 1923.
- 32) Since Seeckt was of the opinion that operative training of general staff officers was ensured by the Führer- and general staff travels, he rejected the publishing of the work as an instruction. A private publication by Hierl was also forbidden for reasons of confidentiality. This shows that Hierl had at least rudimentarily written down the German operative doctrine for a probable future war.
- 33) On the discussion in German military magazines cf. Markus Pöhlmann: Von Versailles nach Armageddon: Totalisierungserfahrungen und Kriegserwartung in deutschen



- Militärzeitschriften. In: An der Schwelle zum Totalen Krieg. Die militärische Debatte über den Krieg der Zukunft, 1919-1939, ed. by Stig Förster, Paderborn 2002, pp. 323-391, here pp. 358-366.
- 34) Cf. Friedrich von Bernhardi: Vom Kriege der Zukunft. Nach den Erfahrungen des Weltkrieges, Berlin 1920, p. 224.
  - 35) Cf. Hew Strachan: European Armies and the Conduct of War, London et al. 1983, Winfried Heinemann: The Development of German Armoured Forces 1918-40. In: Armoured Warfare, ed. by J.P. Harris und F.H. Toase, London 1990, pp. 51-69.
  - 36) Heinz Guderian: Bewegliche Truppenkörper (Eine kriegsgeschichtliche Studie, 5 Teile). In: Militär-Wochenblatt 18 (1927), Sp. Militär-Wochenblatt 649 (1927), Sp. 687-694, 20 (1927), Sp. 728-731, 21 (1927), Sp. 772-776 and 22 (1927) Sp. 819-822.
  - 37) Cf. Bernhard R. Kroener: Der starke Mann im Heimatkriegsgebiet. Generaloberst Friedrich Fromm. Eine Biographie, Paderborn et al. 2005, pp. 246-248.
  - 38) On the development of this concept cf. Heinz Guderian: Achtung-Panzer! Die Entwicklung der Panzerwaffe, ihre Kampfaktik und ihre operativen Möglichkeiten, Stuttgart 1937, Heinz Guderian: Schnelle Truppen einst und jetzt. In: Militärwissenschaftliche Rundschau (1939), pp. 229-243, Uwe Bitzel: Die Konzeption des Blitzkrieges bei der deutschen Wehrmacht, Frankfurt/Main et al. 1991 (= Europäische Hochschulschriften, Reihe III, Geschichte und Hilfswissenschaften, 477), pp. 266-287; Robert M. Citino: The Path to Blitzkrieg. Doctrine and Training in the German Army, 1920-1939, Boulder 1999, James S. Corum: German Armour Doctrine: Correcting the Myths. In: War in History 3 (1996) 4, pp. 384-397 and Hubertus Senff: Die Entwicklung der Panzerwaffe im deutschen Heer zwischen den beiden Weltkriegen, Frankfurt/Main 1969.
  - 39) Zur Entwicklung des Stoß- oder Kampfgruppenverfahrens cf. Gerhard P. Groß: Das Dogma der Beweglichkeit. Überlegungen zur Genese der deutschen Heerestaktik im Zeitalter der Weltkriege. In: Erster Weltkrieg Zweiter Weltkrieg. Ein Vergleich. Krieg, Kriegserlebnis, Kriegserfahrung in Deutschland, ed. on behalf of the Militärgeschichtliche Forschungsamt by Bruno Thoß and Hans-Erich Volkmann, Paderborn et al. 2002, pp.150-152.
  - 40) On the tactical attack procedures cf. Guderian: Panzer, pp. 174- 81 and id., Truppen, pp. 229-243.
  - 41) Senff says that Guderian had, as the first and only officer in the world, led the way to operatively useable tank units. Cf. Senff: Die Entwicklung der Panzerwaffe, p. 26.
  - 42) In detail cf. Corum: The Roots of Blitzkrieg, pp. 136-143.
  - 43) Quoted according to Wolfgang Sagmeister: General der Artillerie Ing. Ludwig Ritter von Eimannsberger. Theoretiker und Visionär der Verwendung von gepanzerten Großverbänden im Kampf der verbundenen Waffen. Phil. Diss. unprinted., Wien 2006, p. 277.



- 44) Cf. Rolf Barthel: *Theorie und Praxis der Heeresmotorisierung im faschistischen Deutschland bis 1939*, 2 volumes., Diss. Uni Leipzig 1967, Sagemester, Eimannsberger, pp. 300-311.
- 45) Cf. Corum: *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*, p.140.
- 46) Cf. Klaus-Jürgen Müller: *Generaloberst Ludwig Beck. Eine Biographie*, Paderborn et al. 2008, pp.217-219.
- 47) Wilhelm Deist: *Die Aufrüstung der Wehrmacht*. In: MGFA (ed.), *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 1 *Ursachen und Voraussetzungen der deutschen Kriegspolitik*, Stuttgart 1979, pp.371-532, here p. 520.
- 48) Cf. Frieser: *Blitzkrieg-Legende*, pp. 7-14.
- 49) On the different planning stages of the later Sichelschnitt cf. Frieser: *Blitzkrieg-Legende*, pp. 78-116.
- 50) Cf. Frieser: *Blitzkrieg-Legende*, p. 39. On German armaments production cf. the article by Rolf-Dieter Müller. In: Bernhard R. Kroener, Rolf-Dieter Müller, Hans Umbreit: *Organisation und Mobilisierung des deutschen Machtbereichs. Kriegsverwaltung, Wirtschaft und personelle Ressourcen 1939 bis 1941*, Stuttgart 1988 (= *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, Teilband 5/1), S. 406-556.
- 51) Cf. Richard L. DiNardo: *Mechanized Juggernaut or Military Anachronism? Horses and the German Army of World War II*, New York 1991 (= *Contributions in Military Studies*, no. 113), pp. 21-32.
- 52) Cf. Christian Hartmann: *Halder Generalstabschef Hitlers 1938-1942*, Paderborn et al. 1991, pp. 235-245.
- 53) The Great General Staff had attributed to the Russian soldiers the ability for tenacious defence before the beginning of WW I. This fact was to be proved time and again during the fighting. Cf. articles in: *Die vergessene Front. Der Osten 1914/1915. Ereignis, Wirkung, Nachwirkung*, edited by Gerhard P. Groß, Berlin 2006 (= *Zeitalter der Weltkriege*, 1), by Rüdiger Bergien. *Vorspiel des "Vernichtungskrieges?" Die Ostfront des Ersten Weltkriegs und das Kontinuitätsproblem* (pp.393-408), Gerhard P. Groß: *Im Schatten des Westens* (pp. 32-61) and Hans-Erich Volkmann: *Der Ostkrieg 1914/15 als Erlebnis- und Erfahrungswelt des deutschen Militärs* (pp. 263-293).
- 54) Cf. Klaus A. Friedrich Schüler: *Logistik im Russlandfeldzug. Die Rolle der Eisenbahn bei Planung, Vorbereitung und Durchführung des deutschen Angriffs auf die Sowjetunion bis zur Krise vor Moskau im Winter 1941/42*, Frankfurt a.M, Bern et al. 1987 (= *Europäische Hochschulschriften, Reihe III, Geschichte und ihre Hilfswissenschaften*, 331), pp. 636-645, Martin van Creveld: *Supplying War. Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton*, Cambridge 1997, pp. 143-180.
- 55) Cf. Mungo Melvin: *Manstein. Hitler's Greatest General*. London 2010, Oliver von Wrochem: *Erich von Manstein: Vernichtungskrieg und Geschichtspolitik*, Paderborn et al. 2006 (= *Krieg in der Geschichte*, 27).

